電波女と青春男

2

入間人間

イラスト†ブリキ

電撃文庫

い-9-9

電波女と青春男②

入間人間

電撃文庫

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電波女と青春男
2

入間人間
イラスト†ブリキ

1億冊
DENGEKIBUNKO
突破!!!
電撃文庫

あーあー、こちら
宇宙人が見守る町。
元・電波女、エリオの
社会復帰をおとどけする。

◀1億冊突破 大プレゼント実施中! 詳しくはオビ折り返しをご覧ください。

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6月の新刊予定

学園キノ③ 時雨沢恵一 イラスト／黒星紅白
アクセル・ワールド2 —紅の暴風姫— 川原 礫 イラスト／HIMA
デュアン・サークⅡ⑫ 導くもの、導かざるもの<中> 深沢美潮 イラスト／戸部 淑
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん『i』 記憶の形成は作為 入間人間 イラスト／左
ウィザーズ・ブレインⅦ 天の回廊<下> 三枝零一 イラスト／純 珪一
双竜記Ⅱ 機械じかけの竜と火焔の翼 安彦 薫 イラスト／Tomatika
猫耳父さん 松原真琴 イラスト／大岩賢次
有川夕菜の抵抗値 時田 唯 イラスト／りちゅ
乃木坂春香の秘密⑩ 五十嵐雄策 イラスト／しゃあ
GENESISシリーズ 境界線上のホライゾンⅡ<上> 川上 稔 イラスト／さとやす(TENKY)
ラッキーチャンス!5 有沢まみず イラスト／QP:flapper
ほうかご百物語5 峰守ひろかず イラスト／京極しん
ロウきゅーぶ!② 蒼山サグ イラスト／てぃんくる
紅はくれなゐ 鷹羽 知 イラスト／玉置勉強
レンタル・フルムーン 第一訓、恋愛は読みものです 瀬那和章 イラスト／すまき俊悟

▶▶▶5月の新刊につきましては、オビ折り返しをご覧ください
発行●アスキー・メディアワークス

入間人間（いるまひとま）

リアリティこそが作品に命を吹き込むエネルギーって言ってたから……。

【電撃文庫作品】

嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん1～7
電波女と青春男
電波女と青春男②

イラスト：ブリキ

一日（いちじつ）の計は晨（あした）にありをモットーにはや数年、一度も実行出来ておりません（笑）。前回同様、今回も各所にオドオドしながら挿絵を描いております。が、がんばります！

カバー／暁印刷

電波女（でんぱおんな）と青春男（せいしゅんおとこ）②

E.T.ごっこして自転車で宙を駆け抜けた夜を経て。布団ぐるぐる電波女の藤和（とうわ）エリオが、ついに布団を脱ぐ決意をした……のはいいんだが。

なぜ俺の傍を離れないんだ？　え？　バイトの面接に付きあえって？　そしてなんでお前は、生まれたての雛が親鳥を見るような目をしてるんだ？　うーむ、こつこつ貯めた俺の大切な青春ポイントが、エリオの社会復帰ポイントに変換されている気がする……。

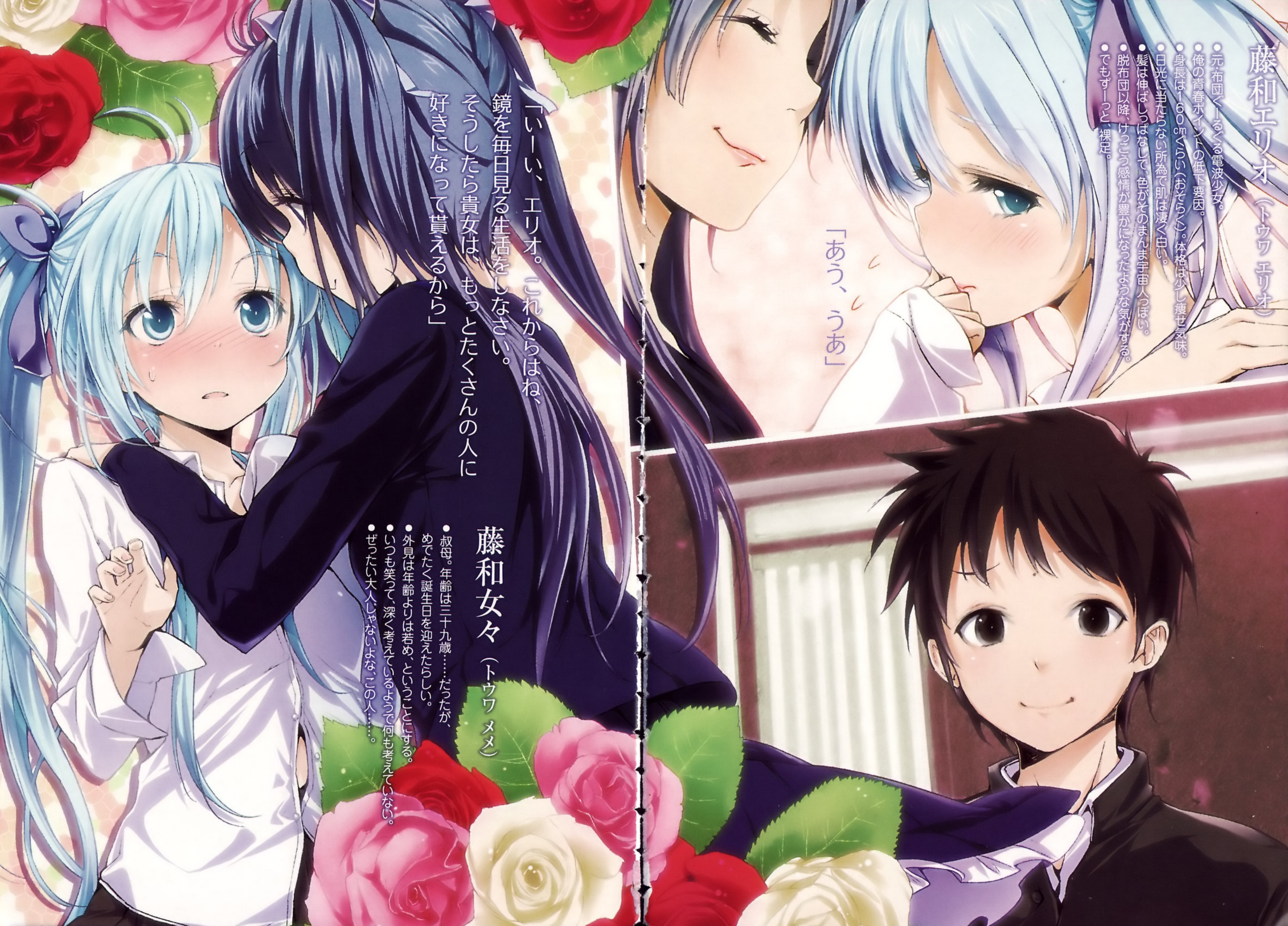
しかもそのエリオの脱電波系少女ミッションが一人歩きして。天然健康少女のリュウシさんとコスプレ長身美人の前川（まえかわ）さんが俺の家に遊びに来たり（しゅ、しゅらーば）、みんなでロケット遊びしてる最中、女々（めめ）さんの秘密と遭遇したり。……というわけな第②巻。なんだかんだで青春、なのかなぁ。

電波女と青春男 2

入間人間

イラスト†ブリキ

designed by Yoshihiko Kamabe



藤和エリオ（トウワ　エリオ）

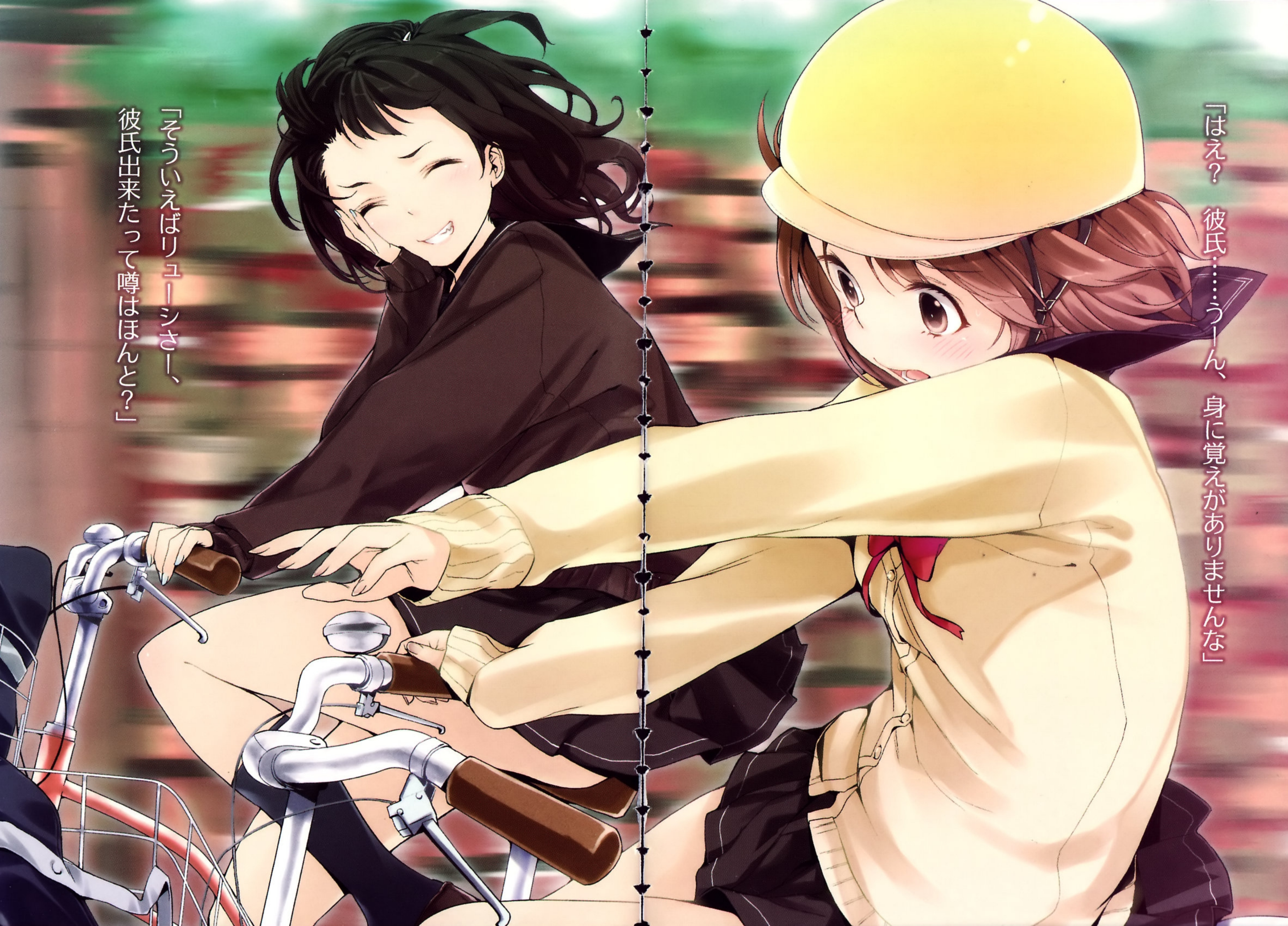
- 元・布団ぐーるぐる電波少女。
- 俺の青春ポイントの低下要因。
- 身長は160cmぐらい（おそらく）。体格は少し痩せ気味。
- 日光に当たらない所為で肌は凄く白い。
- 髪は伸ばしっぱなしで、色がそのまんま宇宙人っぽい。
- 脱布団以降、けっこう感情が豊かになったような気がする。
- でもずーっと、裸足。

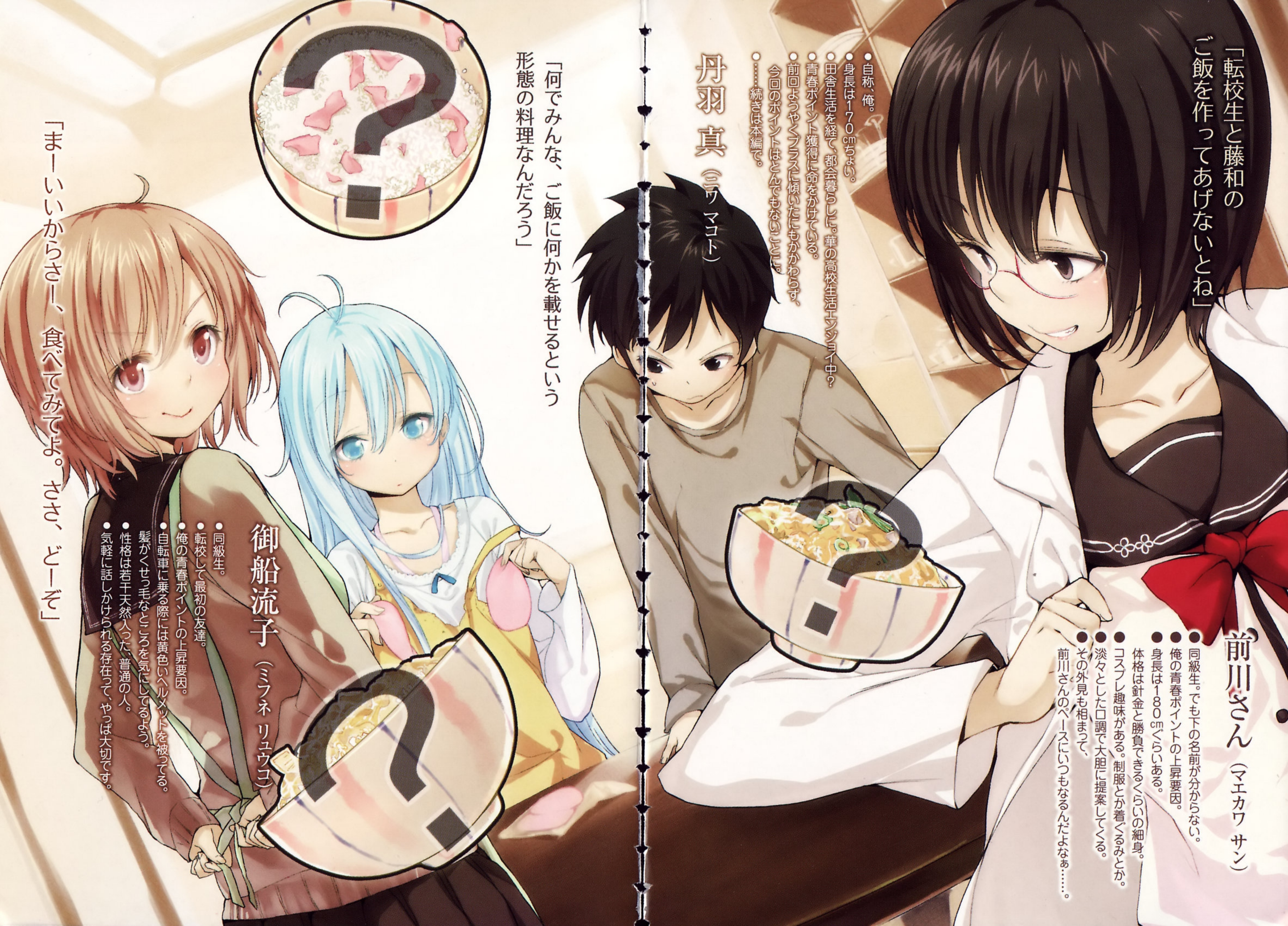
「あう、うあ」

「いーい、エリオ。これからはね、
鏡を毎日見る生活をしなさい。
そうしたら貴女は、もっとたくさんの人に
好きになって貰えるから」

藤和女々（トウワ　メメ）

- 叔母。年齢は三十九歳……だったが、めでたく誕生日を迎えたらしい。
- 外見は年齢よりは若め、ということにする。
- いつも笑って、深く考えているようで何も考えていない。
- ぜったい大人じゃないよな、この人……。


「はえ？　彼氏……うーん、身に覚えがありませんな」
「そういえばリューシさーん、彼氏出来たって噂はほんと？」



「転校生と藤和のご飯を作ってあげないとね」

前川さん（マエカワ サン）

- ●同級生。でも下の名前が分からない。
- ●俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- ●身長は１８０㎝ぐらいある。体格は針金と勝負できるくらいの細身。
- ●コスプレ趣味がある。制服とか着ぐるみとか。
- ●淡々とした口調で大胆に提案してくる。
- ●その外見も相まって、前川さんのペースにいつもなるんだよなぁ……。

丹羽 真（ニワ マコト）

- ●自称、俺。
- ●身長は１７０㎝ちょい。
- ●田舎生活を経て、都会暮らしに。華の高校生活エンジョイ中？
- ●青春ポイント獲得に命をかけている。
- ●前回ようやくプラスに傾いたにもかかわらず、今回のポイントはとんでもないことに。
- ●……続きは本編で。

「何でみんな、ご飯に何かを載せるという形態の料理なんだろう」

「まーいいからさー、食べてみてよ。ささ、どーぞ」

御船流子（ミフネ リュウコ）

- ●同級生。
- ●転校して最初の友達。
- ●俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- ●自転車に乗る際には黄色いヘルメットを被ってる。髪がくせっ毛なところを気にしてるよう。
- ●性格は若干天然入った、普通の人。
- ●気軽に話しかけられる存在って、やっぱ大切です。

一章『ぎゃ――――――――!』………… 10
二章『サンクスギビングの憂鬱』………… 42
三章『リュウ『コ』(←ここ大事)さんの、なんちゅーか、もやーっと』………… 108
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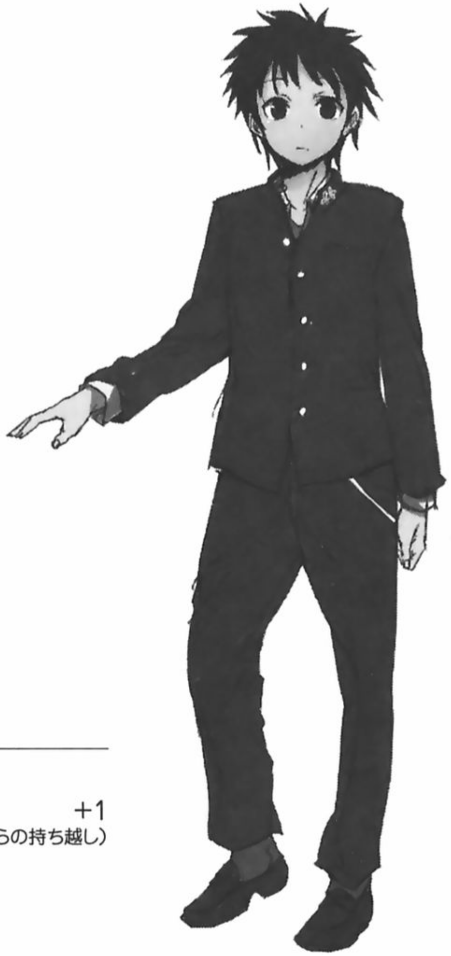
電波女と青春男２

一章　『ぎゃ――――！』



＜丹羽 真＞

現在の青春ポイント合計

+1
（前回からの持ち越し）

Chapter 1 - Kyaah—

I’ve turned forty! Forty! Kyaah~ Eeyaah~ Gyaah~! Forty — a demonic number capable of bringing down a corrupt government; it’s a number encapsulating the bounty and depth of not just life, but of *history*. People lose their immaturity here, and step onto the stairway to adulthood. Kyaah, what smooth skin! I’m so jealous! Dammit, even if she’s my own daughter, that look is just too damn much!

“Don’t steal my monologue!”

And what the hell is up with you replacing the chapter title with screaming? …I don't know what I'm saying either; it's like my mouth was possessed by a necromancer.

…Alright, start over. Hi, I’m Niwa Makoto. At the moment, the room is about forty times noisier.

Today – Sunday, June sixth — a certain forty-year old child was yelling her afternoon away. It was annoying. She came into my room, riled up the dust and crawled around on the bed like a beached shrimp. It would appear to be a futile struggle against the changing of her age.

As a side note, there’s some medicine patch on her feet. It looked kinda depressing.

“What a cruel world~ uwooo~wuu. If time and story could stop, I could be forever thirty nine. My dream of spreading 'thirty-nine year old business card'[1] in the town is over.”

Sniffle~ Touwa Meme-san spat out her absurd wish. She’s my aunt (おばさん), and there is no way a ‘ka’ is between the two kana’s. Since her name might begin to appear in the examples of the definition of forty-years old, my peaceful life is threatened. [2]

“Ahh~ Wuu~ Forty… Elliot is also forty, Hoshimimi is also forty. Onii-san is also forty two… Ohohohoh!” She buried her face into the pillow, an eerie smile crept up on her face. This way, she wasted her move. But in the time of each of my move, she has triple the amount of action – What energy. Well, not like I know what’s happening!

“Meme-san, please go back!” Shoo~ Shoo~ I put out my stance of eviction. It, however, has never worked.

“If you don’t call me Meme-chan or **Honey**, I’m not going to listen! Hmph!” Just as the sound effect suggested, she looked to the side.

Change your honey-smothered-brain behavior, ya forty-year old! I’m the one who wants you out of the house!

“**Honey**~ (the hell’s wrong with me)”

“Heck no! You sound perverted!”

She just grew in some unnecessary direction, compare to before. Sigh… I guess it’s pretty impressive, growing at all at her age.

“Don’t give me that look. My skin is actually so good that some people call me the smooth-skinned sensei! Don’t be shy, come here… Come here~”

I wanted to silently leave her alone, but Meme-san talked like she won’t accept a second of pause: “My~ Don’t be shy! Even though loving your dad’s sister is just as bad as falling in love with your own dad, endearing names are completely fine!” Her raving bloated like marshmallow, pressuring the air and my stomach.

She’s done: she's not at all mature, and it’s going to be terrible if nothing is done. Looks like I have to say something. If this goes on, misunderstanding will occur between us and the neighbors, and there will be no more weekends.

“…Meme-chan.”

“Badump~ (star)” Crap.

I’m going to kick her. And not just her shadow.[3]

“Please stay in *your* room quietly.”

“Am I not~?”

“In your room… Quietly. What you just said isn’t true, but it isn't a lie either, so I wanted to point out one of the problems, but neither way works!”

“La~La~ I can’t understand your tirade~”

Slip~ Meme-san, who gave up on talking, slid closer and pounced me. “Heeyaw~!” She carefully closed the novel I was reading and tossed it toward the bed.

Oh no, Kikkawa Eiji flew off… Not that I’m passionate enough for this author to cry out like that. I've already read a few of his books, but his style is still too wordy. His wordiness is, however, pretty popular in a lot of places.

In the end of the book that just flew off, the main character defeated the weapon-wielding killer with a shoe. There should always be a limit to fickleness. Maybe it's a mutant of the phrase "Pen is mightier than a sword"?

"There are bigger things, Mako-kun. Comfort your aunt whose Happiness-point is dropping because of sadness!"

She shot me a smile that begged for pity. Ugh, listen: people who are traumatized shouldn't smile like that. That aside, what the hell is this point that scales inversely with mine?

"For the sake of convenience, I will name it 'an unbelievable feeling that strikes my heart, warms my skin, and upsets me when it's gone.'"

"Don't read garbage and use it as explanation."

"C'mon! Licking, touching or crying, whatever you like!"

My kind aunt purposefully informed me of activities that would lead to the loss of Youth-points.

"Then I choose to back off." Omitting the specific, I dodged the oncoming danger. Keeping the sum as zero when dealing with Meme-san is actually considered as great fortune.

"How terribly cold of you. You must have been raised in a fridge!"

"It's better than a certain aunt who's like an onigiri in the summer sun."

"Why did I have to be forty? Thinking carefully now, wouldn't my age and Erio's add up to fifty five? That's like Area 51, isn't it? Creepy. Or better yet, Erio 51.[4]

"It's a bit of a pain to think about what you're talking, so can I not?"

"Of course not~" From that fresh tone, I failed to sense the necessity for consultation.

"I see… The numbers don't add up though. Shouldn't Erio be sixteen now?" She's my age.

"I'm thirty nine~!" Meme-san violently raised her hand. If there was a short-legged table there, she would definitely flip it merrily.

"Don't tell me, your birthday has a reentry point?"

“Birthdays are special occasions. What’s so wrong about being thirty nine for that day anyway~?”

She rolled around, exhibiting an act of groveling that was obviously carefully deliberated. Judging from how she didn’t hope to be twenty nine, I could see her modesty. But I wished that she wouldn’t ask for my agreement. How in the world do you want me to response?

“Uh, hm. Anyway, happy birthday.”

‘You are a negative jerk, Mako-kun! Just as I thought!”

Meme-san bolted out of the room after leaving those words. How rude — I have +1 point right now. I counted again back in May when I was bored in the hospital, so I should be right. By the way, because it was too complicated, I didn’t calculate the total of when people came to visit me. But those points were probably canceled out by Ryuushi-san and Nasukawa-san’s attack. [5]

Bam bam~ Unlike her name suggests, Meme-san ran downstairs valiantly, and then ran back up humming ‘Lalala~’. She quietly peeked inside in the hallway. Every time she does something like that, bad feelings and memories surface in me. This kind of sensation is like seeing a single black spot on the radio exercise attendance card. [6]

“I forgot to tell you, Mako-kun – No, *Mako-chan*!”

“What?” Changing my name was definitely pointless.

“The blanket is covered with my smell, so you can sniff it all you want!”

“Wha~ahhh~!”

My reaction was supposed to be filled with a mountain of exclamation marks, but since this topic is filled with too much pain, I could only scream.

“Wuhaha! Ah~ It’s great to help someone!”

Meme-san rolled her shoulders, this time disappearing into the hallway and down the stairs with a demeaning smug.

Look at you – so you *are* worried about being forty. I didn’t even have the strength to make a retort to her back. Are human really capable of doing things they will never regret? I shifted blame to the difficult ethics in life, wanting to lament on various things. I made the decision to never lie down on that bed today.

…And then —

A person rolled through the hallway — as if trading place with Meme-san — from the neighboring room.

She was the futon-wrapped mini crazy girl, the daughter of that person just now. Speaking of which, would Touwa Erio end up like that in twenty years? No, think of it the other way – Meme-san *was* Erio twenty years ago. Hm~ it should be registered as one of the world's Seven Wonders. In Ryuushi-san's words, this is the mystery that exists around us.

With a cartwheel, Erio invaded my room, moving toward the target that was the center. She staggeringly stood up, almost sending the feathers out, and slid. Her legs seemed to be numb from kneeling down.

"Fufufufu…" Erio sneered cockily… Wait, maybe the numbness made her moan, 'Wuwuwu...' sounding like the muffled laughter of a merciless antagonist with flu behind a futon.

Her right leg twitched, and the other kept a subtle arc. That must be the afflicted one. She lifted the blanket… Or rather, her whole body; but gravity had the upper hand, and she filled the space between her and the floor.

I'll give you three minutes. I watched, yet Erio didn't move. She seemed to have given up.

"Idiot." People who are free 24/7 are irritating because of this: It's habits like 'what a pain, let's just lie down here' that are the worst. Yet, is is enviable, being allowed to do just that.

I helped Erio – or the blanket – up. The princess was, naturally, unhurt and indifferent. "Stick your head out." And so, I commanded her as if summoning the Genie.

Swoosh~ Pah! Her head drilled upward, revealing only the face from the futon. Though expressionless, Erio — the embodiment of a pretty girl — was surprisingly earnest. This is like describing an apple, for example. Some people will emphasize on the redness or the size of an apple, but other than food novels or manga, no one will describe the species of apples in tremendous detail. Just like when writing about apples where most people would think of a red, palm-sized fruit, Erio's appearance faithfully reproduces the hazy image that people have of a pretty girl.

Most men would probably think, 'she's super cute; I'll take care of her,' but I'm not one of them: I care more about the inside of a person. Well, not like I can assert that without a shard of doubt, but who cares? I changed my attitude arbitrarily:

“Why are you wearing the futon again?” Didn’t Denpa Onna end in the last volume?

“I’m the most comfortable like this.”

“You wanna decorate that hole in the wall? Whatever. You got something for me?”

Her dialogue didn’t stray to space, but was instead guided toward me, saving all the trouble of communication. However, I’m still not used to it. Or rather, I feel embarrassed to her answering me normally.

Why did her first impression have to be so intense?

Erio, who should be at her most comfortable, was squirming around restlessly, her gaze darting left and right.

"Today is Mom's..." Hearing something like that came out from her mouth was bizzare to me: sort of like something that looked wooden, but actually metalic. My days exchanging with Earthling Erio is still quite shallow.

"Birthday."

"Mmhm."

"...And?" She seemed to think that a single phrase would be enough to convey her intention: "...Everything else in the middle too." My comprehension isn't that good, so give me the accepted answer.

With a tinge of trouble on her face, Erio bit her lower lips and mumbled the missing link:

"The pastry."

"The pastry." I regurgitated pointlessly. For some reason, even the young high school guy with an overactive imagination found it difficult to picture Erio chowing down on snacks. Though I could picture her eating mochi, and stretching it out because the toughness. [7]

“Mom likes dango.” [8]

...Oh, I see. So we're celebrating? It should be fine if it isn't a cake, then, since dango's what she likes.

So, summarizing what Erio just said, I understood the purpose of she bringing up this topic… Hm.

“You want me to bring you there?”

"Mhm."

"Ah—...Sure, whatever."

Like sunlight reverting from dusk to noon, rays shot out from Erio. The particles of light sensed her reaction, and gathered on specific spots of her skin.

Perhaps recovered from numbness, Erio successfully stood up this time and hurried to the doorway.

"Oi, take the futon off first."

"Guu!"

Though dissatisfied, she looked away as if remembered something.

"What's wrong?"

"Cousin." Erio gazed at my eyes. Even the color of her irises was deep as if refined by extraterrestrial means. Water in her eyes gleamed chrome and clear; drinks filled with solvent are incomparable to it.

"What?"

"The futon has my smell. Do you want it?"

"You two got something wrong — I am not a sniffer." [9]

The answer opposite of your thought is so wrong, yet so right.

The new bicycle showed me worlds that I almost forgot.

Wheels that will actually follow the chain, handles that don't feel sandy, frame with no rust or shedding, basket with perfect paint, and the Erio inside of it — the last one was extra!

After my forceful removal of the futon (as a side note, her struggle, 'hng~ hng!', was cute) Erio obediently went out with me. She didn't sit behind me, but instead stuffed her butt into the basket naturally, waiting for the delivery. According to her, 'this is more comfortable.'

My cousin, who always prioritizes comfort, dismissed the white line that labeled sidewalk. Looks like rigorous effort is required to change her life for the better. Since this mission was not obligatory, I wanted to take good care of all of my bones — including my healed right arm. The certain someone who wasted all my calcium is now considered my nemesis.

Sun shone high on the Saturday two weeks after raining season, ensuing the weather of May. The wind and light were pleasantly dry, removing only the extra moisture on skin. The end of spring is the best time to ride a bicycle to enjoy the breeze.

As I followed along the dike, as per Erio's direction, I saw an open ground below with a group of adults and children playing baseball. How nostalgic! Baseball was something of a football substitute back in elementary school, when all the footballs in the gym storage have been taken. [10]

Because we only had a total of six people from both teams, once three people land singles consecutively, we would have the outfielder come and bat. The result was ambiguous win/loss, but looking back now, isn't it pretty good to be able to kill time without arguments?

Kids tend to argue over the smallest things like winning or losing; although most are able to make up in weeks or months, there are cases when they will never speak again. Well, most people lose touch with their friends after graduating, but a happy farewell is always appreciated.

Since there wasn't any oncoming traffic, I had an overlook of the game. The tiny girl batter wore a red yukata, a pair of ukon geta, a construction helmet… A girl? Female? Her age was unknown. But the girl dressed in all that was batting, and she sent the ball flying to the left field. The batter stumbled because of the recoil at first, but immediately dropped the bat and sprinted forward. She made it to second base through the first, triumphantly raising her right hand. It looked like a mischievous Zashiki Warashi playing baseball. [11]

If that's so, then this might not be the little league, but the yokai league? Maybe it's more enjoyable than a field day in the grave yard? I came to my own conclusion despite of obvious facts. [12]

“Baseball...” Erio, who was stuffed int the basket, mumbled. The words unfiltered by futon sounded like notes played on a piano in staccato: they were clear, but vague in meaning.

“Do you like it?”

As I asked, Erio wildly shook her hair that was long enough to be a carpet. The game-watching was declared finished when I began looking at her hair. I rode across the bridge; the dyke disappeared.

“Were you ever in a club when you were still in school?”

Having a normal conversation with a girl riding on your bike — isn't this the promised land of Youth-points? Yet, the numbers showed no sign of changing due to her way of riding. Things are never as expected.

“Club… Astronomy club.”

“Ah, the quiet kind?” Just as I thought: space. So you do like that stuff.

“...I'm part of the go-home club that thinks 'I should have joined' with a smirk on my face.”

“...Is that so?” You'd still look like a painting with a creepy mug, right?

I followed Erio's instruction and entered what looked like the shopping district. Old shops that would treat shopping centers as enemies stood on both sides, and few with the shutters closed scattered here and there. Without fail, people standing by the stores and those in uniform riding on bicycles all turned their heads to gaze at the pretty girl in the basket. I felt awkward — definitely not about stupid things like 'I don't fit in this picture.'

On the southern part of the district, I parked in front of the pastry next to the bicycle shop. Through the window, the scenery inside the store seemed to emphasize the color white.

Written on the signboard outside was the introduction of strawberry daifuku and the new Dorayaki mochi. [13]

As a side note, the shop's name appeared to be 'Mars Globe.' As expected of the greedy town that want to grasp not only the locals, but also a different planet: even the naming has something to with space!

“This is the only pastry I know.”

“Really…? Well, I don't really care where we're going. Meme-san should be happy as long as you bought it for her.”

Maybe she'll even feel that her tears shed for the lamentation of being forty 'what a waste~' and moved to tears again for different reasons. No, not a chance. She shouldn't be the type to honestly accept a gift. Sigh, the thing Meme-san talked about before, the, uh, Happiness-point might rise?

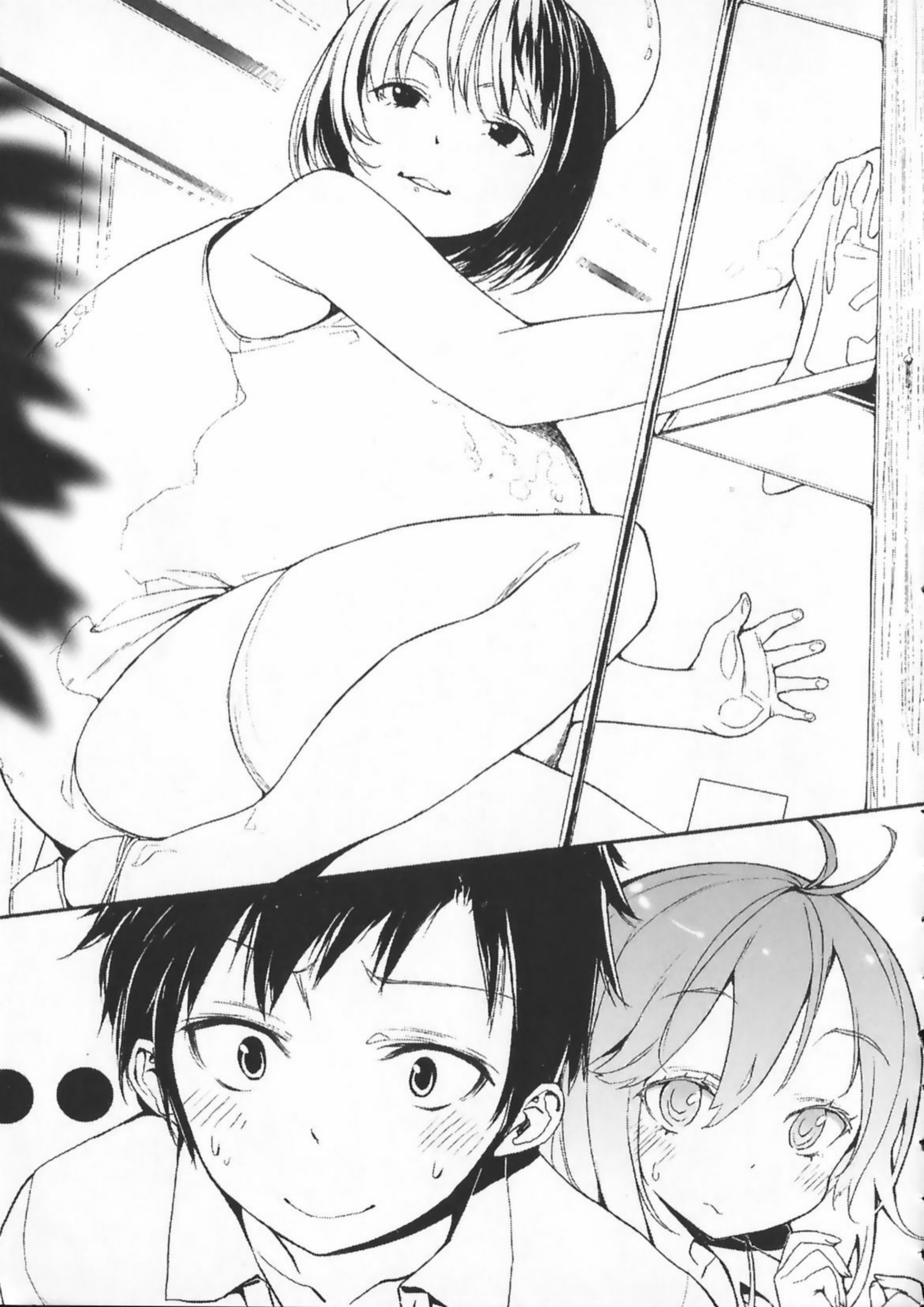
Erio seemed embarrassed; her cheeks flushed pink. She covered her face with her hands, as if trying to hide her blush.

We went inside the gorgeous shop decorated with flags and hand-drawn advertisement, like a refurbished pachinko parlor.

“Welcome… Eh, don't I know you two?”

The white, round object that was initially wiping the display case greeted us cordially.

“...”



Hah? I *have* to describe? But, uh, it's just Maekawa-san wearing a daifuku skin.

“Hm~? Why are you just standing there, transfer student? …And the futon-roll, whoa! It's been a while since I've seen the content!”

“...Mm.”

Was Erio's calmness out of maturity? Or simply seeing the other person as a fellow cosplayer? Faced with the gaze of an old classmate, she actually realized her disgrace and hid behind me.

“Oh man, you are shy now! And so chummy with the transfer student, too, with this and with that~”

“N-no, our relation isn't based on love; it's mostly just familial! So, what is Lady Daifuku doing then?”

“Watch it there, this isn't a daifuku — it's a shiroko of a bocchan dango. Dango, not shirako!” [14]

She protested; her cheeks swelled as if stuffed with dango. I see, so that's a dango on her head.

“The two have totally different chewiness. You get me, transfer student?”

“Really? But you got powder on you.”

“It's just the paint falling off — this isn't exactly expensive.”

She stopped wiping the window and turned to face us. Maekawa-san was unfazed even when wearing this outfit that reduces both defense and coolness to minimum, standing tall with her back straight. Indeed, she lanky.

Rather than calling that a dango, isn't her outfit better suited as a yam? Let's keep this thought a secret.

“As you can see, I work here. A mascot is indeed a must-have in this time and age!”

“Right.” You just look like a ball for a game of pushball though.

“There are two more outfits for the Mugwort and red bean flavor, do you want to try it? Let's all be a skewer!” [15]

She gestured to the inside of the store. The illusion of a drama club called Wagashi store spread from the interior. Just like people who ask others to play football after school, she encourages people to cosplay on the weekend… Is this what the city is about? Hm, definitely can't let your guard down in the city: there are always cars zooming by the road, so a misstep is always deadly. In the country side, the worst that could happen is falling into the field along with the bicycle.

After her careful words of politeness, Maekawa-san pouted out of boredom and began taking care of her customers:

“Alright, what are you doing here?”

“Shouldn't there only be one thing a customer could be here for?”

“The most surprising answer: you're here to stare at me. Mm.”

“Unfortunately, it is the most unsurprising one: Erio is here to get some dango.”

I nudged Erio, who was hiding behind to avoid the gaze attack, onto the stage. Holding her shoulders, I made her face Maekawa-san. I could feel the stiffness of her shoulders from my palm.

Maekawa-san peered at Erio with a novel look, while Erio gingerly looked up to Maekawa-san like a blackmailed girl. Erio may be able to speak normally with her family, but with others, she becomes suffocatingly punctual.

From an outsider's view, if either of them were to represent Earth on the space council, confusion would sure follow.

“Touwa, huh… Heh~ where's the futon?”

“She doesn't wear it anymore, right?” At least outside of the house.

Erio looked down, her gaze escaping to the side, without uttering a word.

“Is it just Maekawa-san in the store? What about the manager?” Since there was not progress in our conversation, I had to say something to ease the awkwardness.

“The manager skipped out, so she asked me to open the store. It's been like this for a while now.”

This distribution of labor is messed up! And she agreed to it. What an annoyingly lenient worker. Does dressing up freely also make you more open-minded?

If I ditch Erio, she will never say her reasons of visiting here. And thus, I had to say, 'all right, what are you buying?' sort of like being her encouraging mother. What a troublesome person.

“Dango, um… I'm here for some Mitarashi Dango.” [16]

She finally kind of successfully spoke her intent to the white dango that called herself the clerk. Maekawa-san said, 'dango? Sure.' After letting her body bump into several places in the store, she opened up a display case:

“How many?”

“F…five sticks.” Erio shot her hand out abruptly, exaggeratedly stuck out all the fingers.

“Oh hoh, thank you!”

Maekawa-san responded with a manly, craftsman-like line, and wrapped her customer's food neatly.

“My hands are quite quick, but I can't get any better.”

She lightly commented, 'here ya go!” and handed the goods to Erio.

Just from this one scene, Maekawa-san appeared like Erio's senpai, or a college student older than she by three years.

As her inadvertent guardian, I opened my wallet and handed a thousand yen bill to the register.

“As for the change, just let me buy you a school lunch of equal price. How's that?”

“I'll gladly accept if it's Maekawa-san's handmade lunch.”

“Tch.” She tutted lightly, 'Jingle jingle~' she hummed out a register sound effect as she gave me the change: “You don't need the receipt, right?” She threw the paper away before handing it to me.

“Thank you.” Erio expressed her gratitude, her voice slight like a ring finger's motion.

“Don't mention it~ Believe it or not, my friends call me 'Maekawa the trouble-saver'!”

It's probably because 'the trouble is always somehow because of her~' or something like that — basically same as the saying 'you know it's Yahari~ (やっぱり矢張)'? But that smug of superiority suits her, so I avoided talking as to not break it. [17]

“Ah, right. Careful that you don't get Touwa kidnapped!”

Maekawa-san began wiping the counter and gave a bizarre advice.

“What do you mean, kidnap?”

“A lot of animals went missing around here recently.”

“Animals? Like pet dogs?”

I pictured a culprit killing animals; a bitter taste spear in my mouth.

“No, wild animals like cats, dogs or the occasional weasel.”

“… Is it the EPA?” [18]

“Mm~ Doesn't look like it. I was thinking since Touwa is like an animal now, they might make a mistake.”

Maekawa-san happily continued her jabbing at the Erio, who hid behind me. Judging from this, she might actually like Erio? As expected of the master cosplayer Maekawa-san, being able to like the crazy girl who roams around town wrapped in futon. Or perhaps she thinks of her as a fellow enthusiast?

“Yep, I knew it. Looking at her trembling in tear; she's practically one of them.”

“Then her species must be space hamster!”

Wahaha~! We guffawed, despite of person in question glaringly at us resentfully.

“ 'Then, I'll see you at school.' “ After saying good bye, we left the store. Though Erio's expression seemed to darken when we spoke about 'school,' that might have just been the light outside that made her squint. The sun after the May rain also made me… Eh? Wasn't there something in the sky just a second ago?

It's too aerodynamic to be a bird, yet too small for a UFO.

“Thanks...”

Erio sat into the bike's basket, carefully holding the bag to her chest and thanked me.

“…For bringing me here.”

Afterward, she buried her face in her thighs, once again hiding her expression. She's embarrassed, right?

Girls who openly show their embarrassment are so cute~ my brain baked slowly in the sun.

Even for a person like her, at such a time my Youth-points will no doubt rise.

“...It's cool, but you have to pay me back later.”

I was definitely not hiding my embarrassment. Never.

There was a Seaweed-wrapped Chikuwa lying at the entrance of the Touwa household.

“…...”

“…...”

I looked at the Erio standing next to me; Erio was staring at it blankly.

“Do you have a twin sibling?”

“I had never split in half.”

Non, non, she shook her head. In other words, this is that? What on Earth is this forty year old thinking?

A profound omen hit me, looking at her appearance.

Every time her happiness rises, my youth sinks with the descending carts.

“Okay.” I took off my shoes first and put them away neatly, then step onto the hall. Affected by me, the slightly-slower Erio followed suit and also took hers off. I proceeded as Erio put her shoes away.

“Ah, uh… This...” Erio, who remained fixed, shot glances at her feet. Why would you do this? I wanted to complain, but the smart thing to do here is obviously to ignore these things!

Luckily, the futon with bare feet didn't move.

“Alright~ C'mon in. The house isn't messy, but it's not too big either.”

I quoted words someone said to me before, inviting Erio in. “Wuwu...” Erio stopped in her track, her reaction ambivalent. Fine, I'll leave you two alone! After excusing myself out, I strode forward. However, where in this house were my legs bringing me?

In contrast to the one from two months ago, the futon-roll that crawled up — Meme-san — cried 'Ugahh~!' and charged toward my direction for reasons unknown. Whatever it was, I ran. I looked back, the thing pursuing me had to be a Yokai. Please someone go and send a rescue notice to the Yokai Mailbox![19]

“Whoa! Go away!!”

“Her der you order me~!” I don't understand your raving!

I sprint through the hall, and jumped into the room on the left. Hm, as predicted, Meme-san can't turn. Step step step~ She charged without signs of slowing, 'smack!' came the sound of running into a wall. Let's take a look at the scene.

Maekawa-san once cried 'Gwaaah!' painfully in the night park, rolling around in an epic fail break dance. At this moment, a similar futon-roll version replayed at the end of the hallway. The roll crawled around, busily bouncing back and forth.

I pushed the futon-roll forward, transporting a pained Meme-san back into the living room. Even as she closed to the table, she still struggled, 'Wuwhooooa' as if she had a cramp.

It made me think of the katsuobushi that would dance on iron plates. [20]

Perhaps to follow her daughter's footstep, Meme-san popped her head out after a while, tongue sticking out, 'ahh~' from top of the roll. Sweat drops formed on her forehead, and her cheeks swelled in redness:

“I bit my tongue. Mako-kun, smooch me.”

“Smells like blood, so I'll pass.” And I don't want to have my first kiss stolen by my aunt either. Feels like I might have to lose some ridiculous amount, like twenty five points.

“Speaking of which, it's so hot in here. I can't believe Erio could stand it.”

“Feels like you might dry out.” If I said her skin, I would probably be strangled.

“So, what were you doing? Learning by experience?”

“Because I figured, isn't 'a pretty girl popped out of the futon!' the best gap-moe?

“That's the route your daughter left two months ago.”

And the noun 'pretty girl' doesn't extend to people of all ages.

“I also wanted to express my dissatisfaction with the world.” To prevent our eyes from meeting, I glanced at her sideways.

This isn't how a forty-year old should express her dissent. But more basically, I don't think a normal adult would run into a wall and then struggle on the floor.

“But I can't see Erio or Mako-kun's face like this, so it's kind of troubling!”

Meme-san crisply spat out some slightly embarrassing words without looking bashful:

“So, where did you two sneak off to?”

She pouted her cheeks, as if she would yell 'you aunt wanted to go too~!' any time, while swinging her arms and legs. I bet this person's attitude probably won't change even when she hits fifty!

“We just went to buy stuff.” Whether this counts as a date differ person by person, but this time probably isn't.

“Oh (you went to get some porn mags)!” She nodded deeply, conveying her comprehension.

“Could you not make weird explanations?” Besides, no one would invite girls to do that kind of stuff.

“Oh~ I get it. You're preparing for our first date by having a drill.”

“ 'No!' “ Meme-san received a pincer attack of denial. Erio, who came into the living room, refuted her mother's joke. Sigh, at least I think its a joke. For a brighter future, I will kill off the possibility!

Erio sat down next to Meme-san; Meme-san didn't seem to want to take off the futon, and she slowly turned toward her daughter like a pair of compasses.

“Welcome home!” She greeted elegantly. What did Erio think of her mother, seeing her like this? From her contained, expressionless face, traces of emotion were hard to find.

For example, I attempted to picture my mom welcoming me home dressed like a spiral bread. 'Welcome home!' ...I will for sure immediately enter the rebellious phase. Mm, it's a mental form of domestic violence. I will not accept it, even if someone tells me it's the real life version of 'The Metamorphosis' by Kafka.

“I'm… Home.”

An anxious Erio squeezed out a few dry words of greeting. Maybe Meme-san's unwavering and amicable disposition is actually abnormal here. How does she act so naturally then?

“Stare~”

Meme-san stared at Erio's knee. Erio couldn't find a proper reaction, so she cowered. Along with Meme-san's outfit, the situation looked like a diagram of a frog gawking at a snake. With no intention of being the slug, I began the search for the T.V. remote. I suspect this will turn into a war of attrition. [21]

Yet the circumstance wasn't so. On a more fundamental level, Meme-san never needed a defensive stance.

“Lick!”

She did it: like a snake, Meme-san wriggled forward, her tongue making an advance on Erio's right knee. “Uwah!” Erio jumped backward. She backed into the wall, leaving particles in the dust of her trail.

Erio's eyes widened as she clutched her chest, signifying her perturbed state.

“This skin… The smooth taste of youth! Erio, Eri~o!”

“Who are you calling that?” And you should start your shedding! Are you that into futon mode?

“I am so jealous!” The honest Meme-san hopped about. It must be someone with a personality about thirty times worse than hers that fed Snow White the apple. But with the result in mind, didn't the whole process lead to the Snow White's first-sight love with the prince? Fate is honestly easily summed up with the word 'inconceivable.'

Seeing Erio unconsciously wiped at her right knee, Meme-san grumbled, “Super~ shocking~” and wormed to my side. I sensed that she planned to lick my knee, so I lifted my legs while watching her mouth, showing full-alert.

“Anyway, when do you plan on taking care of me, Mako-kun? Take this! Princess carry!”

My body shook. Since the damage is reduced like this, I changed my mind — maybe it's better for her to stay like this.

“Didn't I roll you here just now?”

“Ehhh~ You are a complete failure when it comes to taking care of girls, Mako-kun~”

“This is the only way to treat a woman donned in futon — your daughter taught me this!”

And the lady in question is also hunched over, like a kid inching toward a leashed mutt, closing in to Meme-san at snail speed.

“Ah… Even my own daughter is wary of me. Onee-chan is so sad that no one understands me.”

“You reap what you sow...” And you don't understand your own worth. Lets leave it at that.

Perhaps taking her mother's joke seriously, Erio scrambled to the front of Meme-san. Hm, how pure of her. If I didn't know about the situation two months ago, and instead met the her today for the first time, I may mistake her for a shy yet loving daughter. Actually, she's that! The futon you leave in the closet — the people worse than those who become useless outside of their house.

“Um, happy… Birthday.”

“Oh my~ Thank you!” Arcing like a shrimp, Meme-san lifted her chins and cracked a wrinkle — pretending that never happened, she kept smiling.

“But I'm not happy at all...”

She maintained the smile and drawled out a curse. Emotion-contradicting expression spooked Erio, but she still carried the present to Meme-san's face. “Sniff, sniff~” Meme-san sniffed the food as if it's courtesy. Stop that!

“I went to buy… Dango. Um...” Guh! Erio choked, and her shoulders stiffened. “Mom...” She then slouched, “favorite.”

“Kyah~ Eri-chan! Is this a confession of love to your sister — no, mom?”

...Mm? Well, I guess the phrase could indeed be interpreted as “I went to buy dango because mom is my favorite” instead of “because mom's favorite is dango.” Japanese is like a split end on a hair when it comes to delivering a message.

Erio's face burst into crimson, and she hid her face using the cooking magazine resting on the table. Was hiding her face how Erio disguises her embarrassment? Or was it a defensive maneuver?

But what bothered me more was, Erio's nickname is Eri? Ecchan or Rio-chan works too, right? If you really want to surprise people, Orie works too. Though that's someone else at that point. [22]

“Eri-chan is still so cute! Glad you look like mom!”

Hm~ hm~ Meme-san nodded proudly, even bouncing her body around.

She looked pretty happy! Or just someone who wants to convey how energetic she is with the baseline being fresh fish? Although shouldn't it be both when it comes to this person? I honestly couldn't convince myself otherwise.

Happiness-points increases by three~ I attempted to replace her role, playing out the cue.

“Speaking of birthday, we forgot to celebrate Erio's last year. Let's celebrate tomorrow as your birthday!”

This mother suggested a completely incomprehensible yet overall great idea; her daughter beamed.

“Do you want… Dango?” “Yes, I do!” Meme-san put on an innocent face in approval. In asking for comment of her childish behavior, she shot me a look of 'how's this?' to which I only shook my head.

Erio opened the package; Meme-san went from 'sleep' to 'sit.' Erio picked up a skewer, ready to give to Meme-san. The act and expression was like a child's during Mother's day, when she wants to help out in the kitchen: clumsy yet diligent.

Meme-san gazed at the process with a faint smile.

“...”

But all~ she~ did~ was~ watch. With the futon blocking, her arms couldn't reach outward for the dango. She ruined it. And she didn't look like she was going to take it off. She must really like this outfit. Is futon really this wonderful?… No way, I want to try it on too. Hm.

As I fell into contemplation, Erio, with the dango in hand, became more and more confused; even the sauce was on the verge of dripping off the five-in-one skewer. Does she need help? After all, it looked like cleaning up the aftermath was up to me anyway.

“Why not just have Erio feed Meme-san?”

“Eh?!” Erio shot me a surprised look. What, is it really that rare for me to say something smart?

Well, we did jump into the sea before.

“Ara~ I miss this. I used to do this for Eri-chan a really, really long time ago~!”

Meme-san blinked passionately, and “Ahh~” opened her mouth: “Ah… Mako-kun, you're making me blush, don't look~” I'm even more mortified being forced to listen to you say that!

Erio trembled to deliver the dango into Meme-san's mouth. What would happen if it was stabbed in there? Likely like the pirate in the barrel.

“Chomp!” The first three dango disappeared into Meme-san's mouth. The remaining two was pushed forward by a wincing Erio so it'd be easier to eat. Meme-san stuffed these two as well, her cheeks puffing out. “Is it good?” Listening to Erio's query, Meme-san answered, “Mer cherks are going to fall erff.” Actually, looking now, if I were to pinch her cheek, they might actually get pulled off like clay.

“Glance~ glance~” Um, she's making sound effects while staring at me. She's not even blinking. Is she waiting for me to say 'the sound effect is wrong”? Or is she…

I brought a skewer near her lips, and she bit at it. Same-san (鮫さん), I mean, Meme-san added more brethren to the dango bunch before swallowing those in her mouth.

Two more skewer of Mitarashi dango and her face would become dango itself. It doesn't matter how you put it, this isn't how a forty-year old should act. Should I flatter her, 'you're still young'? Or should I say 'please think about your age!' to give rise to her killing intent? Reticence is the wise thing, right? As I came to my conclusion, Meme-san choked on the dango. “Uguuh~!: Her throat bulged into the shape of the final boss laying eggs.

Erio, at loss of what to do. Me, waiting and watching. Meme-san, absolutely freaking out.

After about ten seconds, the event ended in the form of Meme-san swallowing all of the dango.

“That was close! If I died like that, they're gonna think it's an accident or a murder!”

Meme-san didn't particularly seem like she's joking, passively describing her thought on suffocation.

“…...Hahah.” A weak, yet pure smile spilled from within.

Here it is.

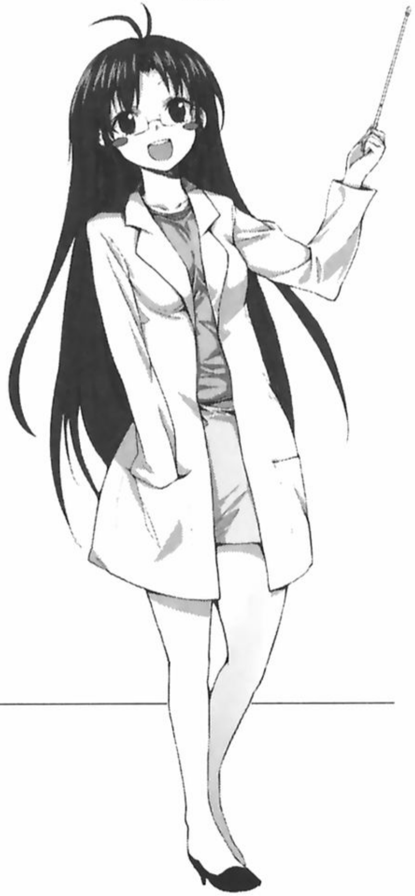
To me, the Touwa household became a place that is slightly, if not appropriately, rowdy.

Yet my Youth-points and independent life are still miles away.

二章『サンクスギビングの憂鬱』

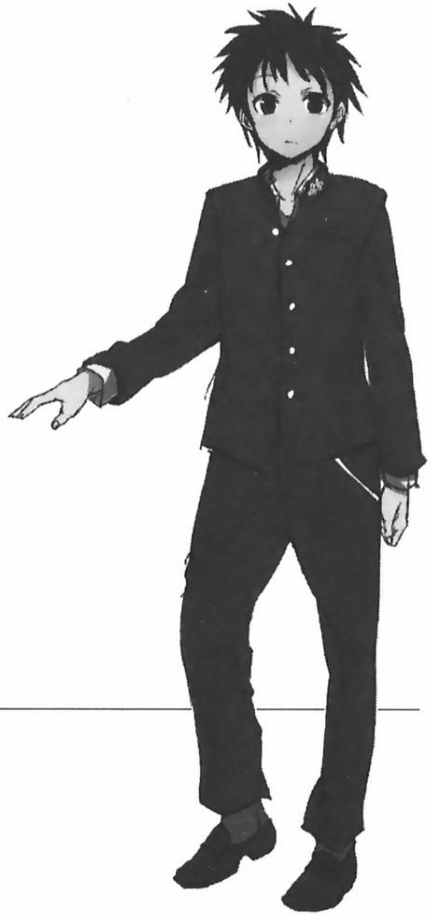
＜藤和女々＞

●よん・じゅ・っさーい!	−4000000
●娘の膝をぺろり。	−2000000
●エリちゃんきゃわゆい。	+3
●お団子もーぐもぐ。	+3000000
現在の青春ポイント合計	−2999997 （新設）



＜丹羽 真＞

●照れるエリオを見た。	+1
●藤和家の一員になりつつある。	−1
現在の青春ポイント合計	+1



Chapter 2 - The Melancholy of Thanksgiving

“Niwa-kun, do ya work part-time?”

Monday, June 7th, in a high school second year classroom, the time when Mifune Ryuushi-san — a classmate of the same grade — asked me this question was when lunch was halfway till over.

Finished with our lunch, we were sipping on our aluminum-packaged tea.

“I thought about getting one in a bit, since I'm not in a club anyway.”

Besides, I'm living under someone else's roof. Living in other's house without doing anything will, for some reason, always unsettles people. This was my impression after living here for two months.

Though perhaps in a few more months, this would change.

“Is that so? If ya get your first paycheck, shouldn't ya buy me a juice?” Ahaha! Ryuushi-san laughed cheerfully; a flower unconcealable by even the rowdiness bloomed in the classroom.

Ryuushi-san is so cute! I complimented freely in my heart. But I couldn't say it out loud.

Eating, drinking and talking with a cute girl. In a way, this is known as a school date. Then according to this definition, would chatting happily with the lady in front of the train station's bookstore who is recruiting for an English class be called a recruitment date? Though questions rose, this was just a made-up phrase that does not need to be concluded as a thesaurus.

“What about you, Ryuushi-san?”

“I told ya to call me Ryuuko! I, hmm, probably won't.”

“Huh, you won't?”

“Money cannot buy what's important.”

“That phrase doesn't really work here.”

Sorry for splashing cold water when you sound so proud.

“Ahh~ but I'm so busy after school with just club stuff, and I don't really need ta spend money… Hm, I'm like, y'know, super open and stuff! Ya know from just looking that I'm different, not some boring, same-faced character! Don't let the rumors get ya!”

What baseless, shameless rumor! Ryuushi-san sucked on the straw stuck in the black tea that she had since this noon. Actually, no one ever gave her a nickname like 'the Horizon' or anything like that.

Someone who looks different from just a glance… In all the people I know, there are probably two who fit the bill. One's an alien, the other a certain lanky person. Meme-san is different in a way, but I might be cursed if I counted her as one. I will unfortunately have to give up on that thought!

“Oh well, let's drop this character topic like it's hot trash. Oh yeah? I guess it won't work then!”

“Slurm?” The result of drinking while questioning is the mixture of sound, Ryuushi-san!

“Uh… What I'm saying is, I was going to ask if you're free after school today, but I guess not, huh?”

“Slurm.”

Ryuushi-san's motion stopped instantly. As if she just consciously thought of doing it, she swallowed the beverage in her mouth and put the package on the table. Her friend passed from behind us and laughed after seeing us as an item.

“'Let's go somewhere again~ Alright~!' Is that what you meant?”

Ryuushi-san's eyes were as if spying. The rubbing of desk and floor screeched intermittently, following her wobbling body.

“Mm, that sounds right. I mean, if you could come with me to buy a few things, it would have been— Uh… If you're busy, then it's fine.”

“Woowhoa~ **Wait**—“

Ryuushi-san's right palm reached toward my mouth, her fingers waving about as if trying to block the movement of my lips. And like a trained hound, I shut my lips and waited for her response.

“Wuu… Bam, bam, pass, pass, dribble; **Nice shot**… Yay~ backup starting lineup Ryuushi~! ...Niwa-kun, pedal pedal… Eeyahoo… What a headache!”

Absorbed in her own world, Ryuushi-san dribbled on an imaginary basketball and tried to ring an invisible bicycle bell, conveying to the world her thoughts in a never-before-seen mime form. But I panicked, since my invitation was neither significant nor important enough for her to weigh it so:

“It's seriously not a big deal: your club should come first.”

“Hm~ Um, did ya already decide on what you're getting, Niwa-kun? Or are ya the people who go into every store?” Ryuushi-san is actually the type who doesn't listen well. So far the most frank person may actually be Erio.

Sigh, but if it comes to misinterpreting the most direct response, no one is better than Meme-san.

“Ah, well~ My cousin seems to be celebrating her birthday today; I thought maybe I should get her something.” I of course didn't use the name Erio, instead calling her cousin.

“You cousin, Touwa-san?”

But the charade was seen through. Talking like this made it seem like it was reproachable to even mention the name 'Erio' in a public place. Indeed, the notoriety of Erio raises the eyebrows of everyone living in this town. Since she doesn't go out either, no one knew that she was kind of back from outer space.

“I don't really know much about this, so I wanted Ryuushi-san to come with me.”

“Ehh~” Um? Her reaction doesn't seem good. “Ryuushi-san just kinda got busier!”

“...Uh, you don't like Erio?”

Her lips were even pouting up. Strictly speaking from the spirit of 'straightforwardness,' I welcome this; but the other parts made it confusing. This feeling is like bubbles quietly rising from the bottom of the pot.

“I don't hate her or anything, and I don't know her enough to hate her.”

Ryuushi-san picked up the black tea and used it as a tool of escape. Sip, sip~ she sucked at the remaining drink, her gaze floating at the clock above the blackboard. I looked over as well, only to see the hand of the clock at a position that would finish this bento known as 'lunchtime' in a few minutes.

“Still, you seem angry.” Even though I don't think there's anything good in it, I still tried to delve into this topic.

“I told ya I'm not mad! It would take a lot to anger the holy Ryuushi-san, it'd worth a prize! Like whenever my mom yelled at me to 'clean my room,' I didn't talk back like I was in the rebellious phase! Geez~”

And the rage at that time was actually growing underneath, and finally erupted now… Could the reason of my instinct be the sensitivity that comes with youth?

“Well, if I hafta admit, I am directing this senseless anger on Niwa-kun, mm.”

“Eh, me?” And she senselessly explained to me. This isn't something that could be excused with an advanced warning!

“I found that Niwa-kun lacks delicacy, geez; you are such a non-delicate (デリカリー)!”[23]

“What does it have to do with delicacy… Uh, which part was? And what was that word combined of?”

“I just thought it sounded good; it's kinda like non-calorie.”

After answering only the second question, Ryuushi-san shot me a dissatisfied look.

“So, am I to give up on Ryuushi-san after school?”

“Unfortunately, you have lost your chance. Also, didn't I say ta call me Ryuuko? It's Ryuuko! Ryuuko!” Underneath the desk, Ryuushi-san's bare foot performed three pendulum movement, justly punishing my ankle for answering the comprehension question wrong. It didn't look much, but it hurt so bad!

“Yeah? Then I yield.”

I declared so, and looked away. Moving my head slowly, I peered over Ryuushi-san's head at the classroom behind. This behavior was without intent, only meant to disperse the atmosphere.

Yet, why did I put Erio as the impetus of my actions? Have I lost touch with the Youth-points?

“Listen~ Niwa-kun.” As if to block my line of sight, Ryuushi turned her head and spoke.

“Hm?”

“Don't tell me you're looking for Maekawa-san.”

“Wha?” Hearing the unexpecting name, I couldn't help but overreact.

“Hm?” Even Maekawa-san, who sat from a bit away, turned when she heard her name. It would appear she was about bite down on a bread, with her mouth still ajar.

“Not a chance.” I denied honestly.

Asking Maekawa-san? Hm… Imagination, go. If she advices, 'how about giving her a warabimochi[24] costume?' how would I react? Rather, the Ryuushi-san who seemed discontent with me bothered me more.

“Shoot!”

Ryuushi-san suddenly hopped up from her chair. She took the supposedly empty drink up above her head, and made a penalty shot. The package drew a parabola, graciously landing into the garbage can in the corner.

People in class went from looking at the shot to looking confusedly at Ryuushi-san. She paid no mind to the gazes, only nodding at the result, mumbling 'nice, nice.' Eveyone's focus instantly disappeared.

As if waiting for this moment, the bell that signifies the complete devour of lunch time rechoed through the school.

It also sounded like the buzzer that ends a game.

“That was cool, Ryuushi-san!”

“It was no biggie~” She humbly replied my solo-support with a wave: “Also, you got the player's name wrong, mister! ...Ah~… I guess I might actually end up hating Touwa-san!”

For realsies~ Ryuushi-san mumbled to herself while picking up her lunch box and putting the borrowed seat back to where it was. Putting laziness and habit aside, spending time with Ryuushi-san during lunch is one of my biggest enjoyment in my daily life. I honestly think that I am actually a very lucky guy!

Just as I was about to thank her for her time with me that cancels out the daily decrease in Youth-points, which kept the total at a positive —

“Oh, Niwa-kun.” Ryuushi-san turned and spoke with a smile as she parted.

“Mm? What's up?”

“Non-delicate.” Ryuushi-san's crisp, bassy voice blew like an Oboe into my head.

Umm? Questions still spun in my head when the crowd swallowed Ryuushi-san's back, its traces gone.

So began cleaning time. People who were chatting away up until now moved listlessly. Under the urging of the person behind, I also began moving the tables and chairs forward, as well as letting my mind run.

“Hm~mm...”

I kept thinking that it was me who upset Ryuushi-san; I don't think this is just me thinking too much!

Youth-points were declining. Are you ok, me? Anxiety and instability are riling up my inside! In a bit, or maybe now, I should find Ryuushi-san and apologize her for no reason.

All right! I stood up from my seat, a plastic bag full of lunch trash dangling from my hand.

Besides, did she really like how the word sounds?

“Non-delicate.”

I spoke to confirm it. The sound “kah” does indeed feel nice on the tongue, I thought.

☆

After school's out on that day.

I was convinced of buying Warabi-mochi. Not the costume, but the actual food.

As for the reason, it was because Maekawa-san, who had yet to transform into dango girl, came to talk to me at the shoe locker:

“Yo~ Makoto-san. What were you talking about during lunch.”

“Eh? It's nothing really.”

“Just talk to Maekawa-emon whenever you're troubled!”

“Ehh~ ...Fine. Maekawa-emon, I need your help~!”

“What's the matter, Makoto-san? Did the Chupacabra (♀) suck your blood again?”

“I can't decide on what to get for Erio-chan~”

“Hahahah, you silly boy. Alright~ When you're troubled, your best friend Maekawa-emon will always come to help~ Follow me!”[25]

To describe using hyperbole, we had a conversation like that.

Simply put, I was brought by Maekawa-san to that Wagashi pastry, Mars Globe, where she promptly exerted the spirit of a merchant and sold me warabi-mochi. That was it. And just like that, as I purchased this thing, the last bill in my wallet was sucked into the cash register. Clink, clank. “Thank you for yer business!”

Maekawa-san, who just swapped with a different worker, hummed while dealing with her customer.

I received the warabi-mochi package with the phrase 'Happy birthday, Erio!' written in blue marker on it. The words were written by Maekawa-san herself, and in an irritatingly messy cursive script.

“No~ problem. My deduction concludes that the chance of Erio bursting into tear after receiving this is higher than seventy percent.”

“For reasons other than the powder getting into her eyes?”

“Relax, relax!” The dango girl answered unhurriedly, and shut the cash register. After getting used to her outfit the second time, I actually thought it was disturbing. I even started having images… Maybe, when there isn't anyone around, the dango and the sakura-mochi actually move around. Like, the head and limbs that were supposed to be hiding pop out, and they greet their neighbors with a 'hi~' or something like that. Since there was already stories with sentient toys that move around, then it shouldn't be too farfetched to have pastries becoming alive. 'Thrown away if not bought, or eaten after being purchased: which one is more painful?” And then, the Youkan will run to discuss this with the strawberry daifuku. Yet, they will not find the answer. Because it doesn't matter if they were thrown away or purchased, once someone leaves, he never comes back. It doesn't matter if everyone groups up, or faces the danger alone, they have to fight with an ever-present terror. Every time when the eyes of men look away, the same scenery replays over and over in the display boxes…

From the same angle, snacks like dorayaki or monako often run into situations where they're purchases with another brother, so perhaps when it comes to delaying the eventual solitude, they're actually pretty happy. But then for the last dorayaki who had to see his brothers disappear one by one, it must be a despair indescribable with words.

If they can move around with their arms and legs, why don't they run? Even though I thought so, but maybe it isn't allowed? I mindlessly thought.

They couldn't show their living side, probably because of some laws of the gods. Entities not accepted as lives in the human world are not allowed to arrogantly break into the territory of men.

The world is born in the cage of the gods.

Even the aliens are allowed only to reach their hands in, behind the bars that confined the universe.

Thus, I believe that aliens do not exist anywhere on Earth. Isn't that right?

Even though I imagined all sorts of things, my mind still does not have the courage to play the scene of a self-aware dorayaki being shoved into a human mouth and devoured.

“What's the matter, transfer student? staring holes at the snacks? Just don't drool!”

Maekawa-san's waving hand and black bottle appeared in front of my eyes. Since who-knows-when, she circled from the inside of the store to where I was. As if mocking my delusion, the limbs growing out from the dango shook along with their trunk.

She even started to drink her cola. Though I wanted to push that round body, I predicted that if I did carry the act out, Maekawa-san will definitely fall onto the ground with a roll and retract her arms. The overly slender limbs of Maekawa-san are capable of playing out a one-time concert of 'snap.'

“Ah!”

Standing in front of the Wagashi shop, I once again witnessed the objects that soared in the sky above the houses.

The speed was fast. It's not a glider. More like a mini-rocket.

As if disappearing into the corner of a screen, the object flew outside of the shop's glass screen and faded.

“You saw that?”

“Mm? Oh, that? It's a rocket.”

She unveiled the object's identity apathetically. But Maekawa-san never did elaborate on the previous explanation, and after she put down the cola bottle (by the way, the bottle somehow had the P*cari label), she carried a dustpan and a broom outside; I followed her back — no, what do I call this? Does it make sense to say the back of a dango? How do I convey that? As a mountain of question marks piled, I chased her out the store.

Faced with the singeing stares of the passersby, Maekawa-san — who directly wore the dango costume outside — wasn't even afraid, but rather completely indifferent to anything but to effectively sweeping with her lanky arms. Am I to follow her courage?

I put the warabi-mochi in the basket, preparing to ride home while chasing Maekawa-san with my gaze.

“Rocket.” Maekawa-san, who picked up a plastic bottle, spoke.

“Huh?”

“The thing from earlier, you probably can't see from your house, huh. Well, not like I know where you live.”

She dusted on while maintaining a hunched pose, and suddenly crouched down 'woo…' I thought something happened and sprinted to her side, 'since my head was down all this time, the blood gathered there.' Maekawa-san explained the symptoms.

“……”

Maekawa-san is seriously unfit for the 3D life! Is vertical her nemesis?

“I haven't had enough sleep recently, so I feel tired.”

“Is that right. But we're still really far away from the final exam.”

“No, it's just that my night job has been more taxing than I thought.”

“…...”

Should I feel normal for myself, who just did a completely gentlemanly imagination? Or should I be ashamed?

“Oh, there it goes.”

The 'rocket' that climbed in the air up until now lost it's thrust and fell from the sky. A tiny flower made of parachute expanded from the tip of the rocket, ensuring the body fall slowly. My eyes followed the rocket's path home, using it as an escape for the reverie:

“Of course it'd fall. It isn't a rocket for space, after all.”

Wobbling but mostly recovered, Maekawa-san held herself with the broom and looked up into the sky:

“That's a bottle rocket. If it was using gun powder, it would have been consider a firework in Japan — and you need a license for that. Normal folks would just have to put up with using water-powered rockets.”

“Oh~” Though I've heard of the name, this was the first I've seen it.

“There's a ridiculously big agriculture school that went under around here, so someone decided to use the school's field as testing ground. A guy with strange ear rings was always there; he's probably someone who just got laid off.”

“Really now~” What a horrible prediction. “You seem to be the expert. Someone you know?”

“Well, I wouldn't say I know him… Actually, why would that matter? Ahahah!” Appearing to not even want to bother with concealing, Maekawa-san just ended the topic. Now I'm curious. However, most of my questions were answered, so all is well:

“You work a lot, Maekawa-san. Are you saving up for something?”

“Mm? Of course.”

“New costumes?” A ruler mascot or something like that would suit her, and it's practical.

“Those too, but what I want now is a moped and a license.”

“Oh~”

“After I get both of those, I can drive you around.”

“Uh, you can't ride double on a light motorcycle...”

“Ahahah! If it's just a simple package, I think you can put it in the back!”

“...I'll think about it.”

I let loose of the brake and turned the bike toward home. In contrast to the noon's clarity, the sky was now painted in grey: the type that would probably rain if any more cloud gather. It's going to pour right as I get home, huh? I predicted hopefully, attempting to forecast.

“Oh yeah. Since you're celebrating her birthday, could you tell Touwa I say 'happy birthday?'”

“OK~ Maekawa-san, you're actually a good person!”

“Hehe, people actually call me 'the surprisingly-good-at-dealing-with-people Maekawa!'”

“Oh yeah? Must be difficult to manage all of those nicknames.”

“Right? Also, my first nickname when I got into highschool was 'the slightly-long domino Maekawa-san.' The first week of basket ball club was so nostalgic! I was actually the star rookie in the beginning, and on the second day I became 'the new guy', and on the last day of tryout I became the most useless noob! For real, I was being treated as a gorilla who can pass a ball decently!”

“...Hahah, that is so you!”

Even though this was a setback story that turned hopefulness to hopelessness, perhaps due of Maekawa-san cheerful tone, even I was influenced into smiling through the entire thing.

Yet for some reason, my conversation with Maekawa-san seemed all too normal. Is it because I don't care for Youth-points? Did I become weird after attempting to fly with a bike?

“Warabi-mochi~” I went on home, waving goodbye to the Maekawa-san who was singing while sweeping.

I looked back after a bit of distance, only to see the white dango crouching in front of the store, not returning the glance.

☆

“Kyahh~! Mako!” I said to stop calling me that.

“Welcome home.”

Two pairs of twin-tails welcomed me as soon as I enter the entrance of the Touwa residence.

One of them even bear-hugged me. Her arms circled around my neck; this was the homemade merry go-around for idiotic couples! Spin… spin… heheh… ohoho… “Not again!” Why do I only get hugged by my aunt? Well, that, of course, is because I have no girlfriend! Uh, does that mean it's my fault? Meme-san spun with my neck as her support; it was heavy and painful. Every time when the whip made of hair hits me, my Youth-points fall with a torturous patter. Was this also my fault? If so, can I also solve it as I see fit?

The fact that I've actually gotten partially used to being hugged by a forty-year old also saddens me.

“Do you want dinner? A bath? Or Eh-ri-o?” Don't drag your daughter into this! Are you some village chief who believes in sending living sacrifices to the cave on the mountain?

“Please let go of me.” I pushed up with my chin.

“Oh my~ How cruel~”

Perhaps ecstatic after playing house as a new wed, Meme-san returned to the side of Erio with a joyous expression that contradicted her speech.

Ah, that's the appearance when Happiness-point is rising! How obvious — I don't even want to look at it. Erio's eyes darted between the ceiling and the floor; compared to her intentionally-idiotic mother, she appeared to be more self-conscious.

Every time her eyes moved, the hair tied to both sides will trace out an incomplete pendulum. Thinking carefully now, this was the first time I've seen Erio with her hair tidied; how do I put this: with her face slightly lowered, and an abashed expression, that twin-tail hairstyle in many ways disallowed me to look away.

The problem was with the other person.

“The hair… Uh… Um...” I tried to control myself from the rude behavior that is touching other people's head.

“Heheh, is it ok?”

“No, are you ok…?”

“I tried to duplicate Erio's elementary school hair today!”

“……...”

Alright, so what were the thoughts going through my mind at this moment?

One: if it was Maekawa-san, she would definitely wear that monster's costume![26]

Two: doesn't it fit Ryuushi-san as well? My imagination seemed to have derailed quite a bit.

Three: why is Meme-san also wearing the same hairstyle as Erio?

As I tried in the most tactful way to ask for the answer to the third question, Meme-san responded with a smile possessing of cuteness and wrinkles (skip), along with a spin, 'swoosh~!' Look, I've been telling you all this time~

“I thought sometimes we should return to innocence, so what better time than now?”

What do you mean sometimes?

“...I am doubting my usual image of you being a grown-up.”

Actually, having the same appearance on both inside and outside is often considered an amazing feat.

But is there any other besides me who's witnessed a forty year old twin-tail? After all, there isn't a demand for it.

“I've also ran around like this before; the times when you'd run around with snacks you bought from the grocery stores… It's true~”

Meme-san's focus faded into the wall to the left. But kids nowadays don't have chances to visit those grocery stores!

“Seriously, it happened!” You don't need to say that sentence with such a solemn tone either, right?

“M-...mom's past?”

Erio asked vaguely, sheepishly joining the conversation. “Mm~ mm.” Meme-san beamed a benevolently motherly smile at her daughter — an otherwise normal behavior saved for the hair. The two twin-tails faced each others.

“Unimaginable?”

“Mm.”

“If Erio go look into the mirror, things might become clearer!”

Meme-san grabbed her shoulders and moved closer to her face as if about to kiss.

“Awoo… Uwah!” Erio used a palindrome to express her shock and bewilderment.

“Listen, Erio. From now on, you have to live a life looking into the mirror everyday. That way, more and more people will like you.”

Meme-san bumped foreheads, a mischievous smile on her face. Perhaps due to awkwardness, Erio's eyes occasionally darted to me; while focusing on the surrounding, her cheeks were imbrued sanguine.

The futon that served as estrangement disappeared, and a family was born in the Touwa household. If Meme-san's hair was the usual, it would have been a moving scene, but why did she have to always be the deviant?

As for whether it's intentional or not, there hasn't been a consensus.

“The gap-moe level of what I just said had over seventy percent chance of making Mako-kun fall in love with me again.”

Oh~hohohoh~ Meme-san purposely revealed an antagonist smug to test my reaction. “I've never loved you, and that wasn't much of a gap.” You always show the side of you that's too real.

Meme-san pouted in discontent, but immediately regained her smile, and pulled her hands away from Erio's shoulders:

“Alright, time to get dinner ready. Sigh~ Can Mako-chan become a professional househusband faster?”

“Sorry, but I like Meme-san's food.”

“Eh? Does that mean you want for me to make Miso soup for you every morning?”[27]

“You're jumping to conclusion. Also, you're going too far in the no-traffic zone.”

“So we gotta go slow, right? Rather than hasty marriages, Mako is one of those who value the process! I have to write this down.”

“Could you also do something about your enthusiasm while you're at it?”

Woolalah~ Meme-san, who ignored my response, skipped around in an age-misfitting dance and proceeded to the kitchen. The twin-tails on her head precisely followed her casual movement; for some reason, this scenery created a sense of forlornness.

“…...”

The phone rang. I reflexively picked up the extension sitting in the Touwa house entrance.

“Hello.” I hesitated: “Touwa residence.”

“Oh? Makoto? It's been a while~ Remember your mom's voice?”

“Uh~ Now I do.” Not to the point of 'I miss it~' though.

“What about the smell?”

“I forgot what my favourite dish was, hahah!”

It's my mom. I forgot where she was, since I've never asked.

“I'm worried about my adorable son, so I called. How are you?” From the speaker came the sound of a rhythmic knock; should be mom knocking on the floor with her finger: It's her old habit.

“Hm, I'm alright. You?”

“We're great~ wanna hear it for yourself?”

“No, not hearing from you at all was evident enough.” If I said yes, she would have just sung anyway. Mom's hobby is to sing loudly while walking around the train station — that's just how she is.

“What about eating? Are you eating right? You're at that age now, so you need to grow more!”

“I am, especially dinner.” Because I have an aunt eating with me who would grumble if I don't finish.

“What about school? You're not part of the Student Sandbag Council, right?”

“There isn't any real bullying here, so it's a good school. Also~ Isn't this dad's old school?”

“So, isn't about time for a girlfriend?”

“You seemed to have forgotten about the Japanese culture, mom!”

And then I received simple queries regarding life for the next minute or so. Basically good, I responded so.

“Alright, I'm letting dad on.”

Mom's voice faded; replacing it was an obscure breathing and a deep voice sitting down next to my ear.

“Hey, it's your dad… Oi! Is that a good open?”

Good! Good! Mom's encouragement mixed with the background.

“Um… Hm, you getting used to the life there?”

“Uh, yeah. Hm, I guess.”

How do I put this: whenever I talk with dad, we're always so uptight.

“Did my sister cause you any trouble?”

“N—ope. Absolutely none.” Whoaho, I just straight-up spat some irresponsible lines.

Or rather, that's the first time I've heard anyone saying that to a lodger!

“Ah! Mako-kun!”

Aunt Skippy came back in no time. Is there maybe a way to use perspective to keep her forever away from me? Sadly, my wish reached no one, and Meme-san stood next to me.

“Who called?”

“My parents.”

“Ah! Good timing, kyah! Let me talk to my dearest brother, quick!”

“Why is it that I'd rather smash the telephone than let you speak?”

“My plan this year is to play the gap-moe sister!”

“…...” I could only hand the speaker to her wordlessly, and reach back to my warabi-mochi.

“Hello-in, Coca-ine… Ah, don't hang up! You're just like Mako-kun, hmph! You used to only talk with your girlfriend for forever, I've always wanted to beat the crap out of you...”

Meme-san entered the gossiping-women mode; I decided to leave her alone.

My eyes met the neglected Erio. She stood at the same place, her lips opened, and her mouth about to speak. Yet she stayed quiet, as if observing me.

“Is there something on your mind?”

“May I?”

“Yes.”

“Did you propose to mom?”

“Hell no.”

“D-Dad?”

“Please do not think that we've separate since your birth, and this is our tear-jerking reunium, and call me that. Of course not!”

On a more fundamental level, people should not marry my aunt. Of course, there isn't anything regrettable this fact. Absolutely none.

Sigh, with your cousin though it's fine. But so what?

“Cousin.”

The cousin who still refuses to use my name spoke without intonation. Between us, there should have been an impressionable introduction. However, if Erio expressionlessly call me “Mako-kun” one day, I might actually collapse. The pointer of Youth-points will fall instantly to Erio because of this tiny fuse.

“Mm, what is it? Lets not talk that stuff anymore.”

“I have something I must discuss with you. Come.”

“Discuss? Sure, I got something for you too. Lets go!”

Disregarding whether she'll like it or not, I have to give her the warabi-mochi. It came from my wallet, after all.

“Mm.”

Though deadpan, she still nodded satisfactorily and proceeded into the hall. Discussing with me… hm~ I'm fine if it isn't anything serious — like about her memory. Maybe she cares a lot about it, even though she remembers nothing. After all, it isn't something easily found.

“You remember… So what about … You jerk…… Also, I have a question for you: Nii-san, you used to scare...”

Meme-san was still talking. Sigh, just leave her!

Behind the entrance's frost glass, I heard the sign and sound of something falling. It seems that even arbitrary forecast is sometimes accurate. My sinking heart somehow rose, and my steps to the second floor faster. No matter what she wants to talk about, all I have to do is to reply with a cheerful attitude — just mimic Meme-san when it comes to this.

I follow Erio's steps onto the stairs. Did she just go into her room? Recently I began to realize that I could no longer go into the room of my cousin Erio, who took off the futon and became normal, along with a face like that.

Stepping into the second floor, I skipped my room, directly to Erio's. In the room filled with fragments of space, the owner arduously began her work of putting on the futon.

“Hold it!”

Erio looked back after adjusting the rope to the perfect tightness, as if asking, “what is it?”

“What kind of topic would need you putting on the futon? Speak to me.”

“I want to speaking with you calmly.”

“As for staying calm, please get used to the human way.”

I took away the rolled-up futon and loosen the rope. “Ah~ ah~” Erio emitted a sound between protest and lamentation, only able to watch as the event unfold. I had no need to pity her. Probably.

Though that may be so, after seeing a restless, trembling Erio glaring at me in normal clothes because I took her usual outfit, I felt a bizarre drive of 'I must gratify her.' And thus, I decided to began the ceremony of handing her the wagashi I held in my arm:

“Alright, on a day that's kinda like your birthday, here something for you that's kinda like your present.”

I put the packaged warabi-mochi on Erio's tiny hands. She stopped for a second; though she gawked shockingly, she still flipped the package around, or stared at the elegantly-written 'happy birthday,' as of trying to get a grip on the situation. Also, she seemed to be searching for the proper emotion for such an occasion.

As the warabi-mochi completes its three-and-a-half circle, Erio looked up:

“Thank you.”

“Hn~ Uh, well, it's to celebrate.”

“I'm happy.”

“That's good.”

“I like.”

Hearing her consecutive thanks in her faint reading voice, I didn't

know where I should kept them. Moreover, hearing the word 'like'without the object in that sentence gave me a ringing in my skull. Normally, would people say that without opening the gift? I almost opened my mouth to correct her, but it's probably because she didn't know what was inside that I get to hear her say 'like.' I guess all ends well, right? I couldn't help but agree strongly.

However, Erio naturally did not burst into tears. It seems like in this town, you just can't trust seventy percent.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

I peeked at the dusty telescope at the corner of the room, urging Erio to begin. She twitched and straightened her back — rather, it was the reaction when the body is in shock — putting out a very elegant pose:

“Um, before I tell M-mom, I wanted to talk about it with the c-cousin.”

Erio's pauses seemed to be placed incorrectly, like she's forgotten about how to speak normally.

She moved her hands forward and clutched tightly. Under the thin hands that hid few veins, and in the palms that nails carved lightly into, what kind of determination was hidden? I stared, at the wrinkles that formed between her pushing brows, the irises that kept escaping to the sides of her eyes; the lips that shut tightly, and the rising cheeks that seemed to hold back the impulse to puke… Wait, hold up, hold up. Is this really voluntary? This expression looked like she isn't exactly willing!

As I predicted, after a few minutes, Erio still couldn't expand the conversation by speaking, only to reveal a suffocating look. The price of not breathing is choking and coughing at the interval of once a minute. When that happens, the twin-tails' tips dance like twins in the air.

“...Look, I can't understand if you don't speak.”

Don't expect some psychic stuff! My command list doesn't include 'Psych!'

As if saying, 'yes, I know,' Erio nodded hard, finally swinging her clasped fists, and using the forward momentum to let her throat go:

“I need to work!”

“Huh?” Fortunately she didn't say 'you.' Let me relax for a sec… I mean!

“I want to… go back… to society? Possibly… Maybe… I… think…?”

Like a leaf floating in the river, this assertion's ending and resolve slid away.

...Fine, only because she had guts. Since it's the first time, I'll be more lenient. Erio's Return-to-society points, +3.

☆

Following the map crafted by none other than Meme-san herself, we proceeded downtown. At the end of where the eyes could see, there stood a hair salon most conspicuous with its white wall untouched by the wind, and the bed sheet drying on the second floor balcony.

Outside of the salon were pots of flower and cat decorations; the entrance might have posters for eyelash curling and hair products, but nothing about hiring.

The wind today seemed to have been showered by rain before coming here, its texture heavy. Once it touched the skin, it left the moisture and went with no avail to the heat.

“Alright, let's go!” I reached to the back of Erio's knees, lifting the girl who was still stuffed in the basket. Once the futon is off, I become overly conscious to the softness of her skin. During the process, I could seldom look at Erio's face.

I put Erio's onto the ground, and stepped away from her. Why am I taking care of her so much? Even though my many doubts since the age of futon was unbroken to this day, as long as she opens her lips and say, 'thank you, cousin,' the me of recent begins to accept things with a 'whatever, it's fine.'

Today she wore a white shirt and skirt as well. Though shoes wrapped around her feet today, she was still barefooted. According to Meme-san, Erio seemed to have disliked socks since childhood.

I couldn't stand staring at Erio for some reason, and so I scratched the back of my head — I could even hear rustling of notebook paper in my palm. As a side note, Meme-san's map this time had some rather plain content such as '↑ 2 points' and '↓ 3 points.' Or put it this way: the directions became obvious fighting game commands such as 'A (Medium kick)' or 'Y (Light punch)'. My thumbs' skin might peel off if I follow her guide.

Before I strode forward, Erio remained fixed on the spot. I pushed the back of Eri-chan, who, thanks to her long time as a shut-in, has become overly passive. The situation evolved into one where we're finally in the salon.

I looked up to the partially covered, but overall categorizable as clear, sky to see if there were rockets flying.

Though I'm unsure how many points it would require for her to succeed, Erio's 'Return to society movement' has began.

Today was Saturday, June 12th — five days after her declaration.

The morning after Erio's substitute birthday took place, after I reported to Meme-san, 'Work? Erio? Mm~ I don't see what could go wrong~' She gave a casual answer while mixing the Natto. The possibility of her still being half-awake was there. “Then~ It might be better to make her hair better~ Let me introduce her to my favourite stylist~” Meme-san mumbled vaguely while drawing the map for us. Hm, thinking back now, she was definitely not awake.

Stepping into the salon, we felt the welcome of only a breeze — from the fan set on weak sitting at the entrance.

“Welcome~ We do any cuts!”

The one who welcomed us was a beautiful woman with a dangerous business-like attitude.

Wearing a blue shirt, her skin was as pale as the autumn cloud itself. This lady, whose entire outfit seemed to mimic the clear sky, looked to be about twenty or so. The long hair that grew past her waist appears to be saying, 'it's hard for even a hairdresser to cut her own hair.' Is she the owner?

“All right, someone's here. Go inside.” She directed the little girl playing a child piano on the sofa. She's probably her daughter. “Hm~” the girl replied ambivalently, at the same time picking up the piano and trotted her way into the inner door. She glanced at us halfway, but sped away when our eyes met. For some reason, I felt guilty. The woman who appears to be the owner turned the seat in front of the mirror toward us, welcoming us with an innocent smile that raised the mysteriousness of her age:

“Please sit here~ Young couples. Are you both getting a haircut?”

“No, just her please.” I put my hand on Erio's head, entrusting the job of hair treatment to the owner. If I leave her alone, Erio might never make the first step; therefore, I nudged her lightly from the back.

If a head-start was given, she could at least walk up to someone else — this was the Erio now. Is it ok to have the first step to be the right? Or the left? She might make conscious effort on those parts in order to practice. Doing everything, whether big or small, with full attention must be really painful! It would be really hard to fall asleep if you have to pay attention to how you breath after getting into a bed!

“Come, sweetie.” Once the owner beckoned, Erio began her run and jumped into the seat. Then, her fixed expression remain lowered to her thighs, her face hidden. The owner was a bit surprised to see her behavior, but the smile lingered on her face: “Mm, what an interesting girl.”

The owner adjust the seat's direction toward the mirror: “At this time and day, just being a pretty girl is not enough: I love this kind of suspicious characteristics!”

Heeheehee~ Like a bully who's locked on on her target, the owner snickered with a grin all while preparing the barber cape. “But, I need your face up here!” Hearing the order, Erio quiveringly stiffened her back.

From the mirror, she met my stare… Mm~ Autonomity is important too. She herself probably wanted to get a haircut as well. In any case, I mouthed, “you can do it!' to encourage her, and walked toward the sofa where the little girl sat. Then, I looked around the salon.

In the middle of the table ahead was a glass plate filled with candies. Probably for bored kids. Around the plate scattered women magazine and manga. Neither were my forte, so I didn't reach for them. It's just that I've begin to think that, maybe I should start reading manga to catch up with friends of the same gender? Sigh, maybe not now.

Cable broadcast played in the store; the fan spun weakly. Also, modern art painting with kindness instead of artsiness hung from the wall — probably the school project of the kid from earlier. Obviously it was the pride of her mom, especially since it was hung with a frame. That's much better than idiot parents, anyhow.

“What kind of hair would you like?”

The owner wet Erio's hair with a water spray, asking her customer's desire while combing the strands. Asking Erio for specific opinions, it's just… I grimaced on the side. The heat from thinking dyed her ears crimson; after holding back her impulse to hide her face, her final request was: “S… Something good!” At least it was an answer better than something like 'not too bad' or 'okay.'

“Meaning I can do whatever I want?” Erio nodded. “A chance for me to show off, huh? But you're fine: just a little failure wouldn't ruin your cuteness.” As the owner finished, she made the motion of shaving her entire head. The space hamster shook her head frantically, probably taking the joke seriously.

“Oh my~ You are so cute!”

The owner leisurely enjoyed her customer's fearful reaction; that devilish grin really suited her.

From the mirror, I seemed to have witnessed her breezy proficiency and experience.

The owner's fingers circled around the scissors' round handle, as if pityingly feeling the hair behind Erio's head.

“What's your name?”

“Erio… Touwa.”

“Touwa? Isn't that Jojo-san's (女女) last name?”

“Jo-… Jojo… M-my mom.”

“Hoh~ You're Jojo-san's daughter? You're cute just like your mom!”

What a skillful owner~! I'm impressed. Was the reason why her words didn't sound sneering her personality? Once again, I experienced the accessibility that comes with the so-called beauty.

Accompanies with a light cutting sound, the scissors began fixing Erio's hair. The hip hop music from yesterday also ended passionately with a trumpet; the momentary silence lowered the bar for words.

“Your hair is really long.” I tried giving the owner an unoffensive thought.

“'Cuz it's really convenient for strangling, right?”

She proudly introduced me a chilling usage. Perhaps also thinking that it was funny, she added a laughter 'ahaha!' afterward. The way she laughs was not different from the way Meme-san does when she mentions the past.

“Um… Name...” Since the futon was taken off, she lost her furry shield; the fact that Erio was awkward with words was exposed. I think she should give up on the service industry.

“Hm, sorry, I didn't hear you.”

“Name… What's yours…?” Oh, she's really trying. Yet, every time she opens her mouth, the returning path to society becomes darker.

“Oh, me? I'm Ooi Tooe. My friends always call me Toeic!” The twenty-some year old smilingly introduced herself with an abnormally fitting teenager tone. The owner — Ooi-san briskly cut Erio's hair. Long hair that grew freely fell like Nagashi-soumen that were not picked up, drawing out on the floor extraterrestrial shapes.[28]

Erio lowered her head to avoid the mirror, rendering her inner thought completely unreadable.

"...Mm?"

The door inside cracked open; the little girl from earlier peeked inside the salon. Her eyes were mostly on her mother's side face, unreservedly emitting rays of hope that her mother would accompany her. But her mother was absorbed with Erio's hair with no sign of noticing.

Instead, the child traded look with me. "Hmn~" Though she immediately went back, the same sound as before came. After a bit, I could hear from the inside piano keys orchestrating a weak and unskilled melody. Was that some sort of taunt for someone? Maybe also a way to get attention.

"What's the name of your boyfriend there?" Ooi-san abruptly indicated the third person's existence.

Erio stuffed her face into the cape covered in hair, attempting to hide her face. "Ugee!" Perhaps some hair got into her eyes, she made a strange screech. "Eh? What's the matter, Ecchan?"

The cause of the chaos, Ooi-san, expressed her confusion.

Yet this was the only time I understood Erio's perplexity.

Boyfriend? There? I hoped she would properly pinpoint the location.

In short, my reaction was to check the surrounding of the sofa where customers would wait. My eyes could see objects, but no subjects. Even the inconceivable person in the mirror's world… Nothing. I'm fairly certain that so far in this salon, there are only three people — me, Erio and Ooi-san — breathing out carbon dioxide. As for Ooi-san's daughter, I could not open my mouth and ask for her name. If I do that, the kid might end up sobbing, 'wahh~!'

Looks like if I were to give up on wondering around the destination, I seem to have to admit: boyfriend = me. The conclusion waited open mouth.

…Uh, hm? What was I feeling? Uh, I think… I think we shouldn't delve in too deeply.

"No, I'm her cousin, the kind that's not a boyfriend." My speaking speed was especially fast probably because of the increasing pulse behind my ear and on my wrist that accelerated the rest of my body.

“Cousin… Ohh!” Ooi-san clapped her hands without letting go of the scissors: “So you're that Makoto-kun?”

“Eh...Ah, Meme… My aunt told you?”

“Yep… So, you're the infamous Makoto-kun who looks at your favourite aunt with slightly evil eyes?”

Has the gossip of that person accumulated so much that her lies have became the truth?

About two weeks ago, I was about to be too friendly with her name, and ended up correcting myself and accidentally calling her 'granny.' Was she still holding a grudge against me for that?[29]

In any case, I couldn't stay anyway. My mood now was as if I was stuffed with all kind of rocks:

“I'm going out for a bit, please call if you need me.”

“Ah, there he goes.”

Ooi-san's tone was like after observing a raucous cicada that came into your room and left from the other window: she neither teased me with words, nor made me stay.

As I looked up, I saw Erio, who became a feather decoration with her eyebrows and other parts were covered in hair, sending me a distress signal. I, however, still mouthed her a 'you can do it!' and fled the scene. I'll pretend her journey of returning to society has already begun with a '1UP mushroom.'[30]

To digest time and shame, I wondered outside the salon. At that moment, I noticed the colourful pictures stuck on the window that I glanced at earlier. There wasn't much around here that interested me, anyway.

A blonde model in sexy pose showing off her gorgeous outfit, hair and makeup went down the same path as the authors of school textbooks. In other words, she's been vandalized. Long hair grew from the model's nose, and continued into her mouth through the jaw.

Which grade schooler did this? Also, why do people think adding hair on faces is funny? I kind of pondered for a while. The other advertisement seemed to be irrelevant with a hair salon. The content wasn't particularly rich, but there were strange words written beneath the title. Who knows if it was an address or a cipher.

But what the hell was it? Was it like a presentation on something such as 'we sold medicine that could give your skin and hair as smooth as your age ÷ 2'? Even though I couldn't read anything. If it were Meme-san, she'd probably pounce the paper like a starved orca.

It's just that the hand-written heading 'for the you who isn't ready to grow up' seemed to plan on residing in my left eye. Of course, the landlord eyeball really wanted to stare at the newcomer as a way of welcoming, threatening him that 'this is borrowed; you will pay for the monthly rent on time, right?' It worked: tears with too much salt rolled from the corner of the eye into the mouth at precisely thirty seven degree Celsius.

Whatever, uh… Just kidding! Is that enough? What a drag! Perhaps affected by a novel I read before, I imagined an annoying article full of lies. Damn you what-his-face (I forgot his name).

“Was it too short?”

“Mm~ I think it's fine.”

The correct answer was— honestly, I couldn't even tell if this length was any different from the one before. Why do girls care so much about cutting too much hair?

“In any case, it's way more refreshed.” I remarked using the less problematic compliment.

“Refreshed~” Erio swung her head to check the hair; the tidied hair followed subtly.

Her behavior was no different than a grade schooler who is about to head into the pool after coming out from the changing room. I almost chuckled.

The cost was covered by Meme-san's five thousand yen military fund. “All right~ thanks! Next time I'll cut your hair too, so make sure you come back!” After Ooi-san gave me the change, she beamed at me a close-ranged smile. It made me think that a situation where a man would happily say 'keep the change~!' isn't completely unreasonable! I deduced: her husband must have been mesmerized by the same smile, huh.

Erio and I left the store after bowing in thanks. For reasons unknown, a fulfilling sense of accomplishment after a job well done surged, but I lightly brushed the feeling away. For Erio, the job is only about to start.

“Alright, let's go find a place for hire.”

“Mm.”

“But, where do you actually want to work?”

“Anything is good.”

“Hm… But just because you think can doesn't meant you can, right?”

I euphemistically implied that she shouldn't have any expectation, but Erio seemed to not comprehend.

She shakily climbed onto the bicycle, into the basket… Uh, should we start from fixing habits like this? I must properly teach her the correct knowledge of fitting back into society.

Yet this time, it might become an extreme rehab: just how much changed in the environment of Earth while Erio was out in space? Let her experience reality!

Because I thought I should respect Erio's positive spirit, I still stepped onto the bike even though a part of me wavered. I prayed that her spirit would not be crunched by the wheels.

The preparation for the job interview was already completed yesterday.

I brought Erio to the station to take her ID photo — I even wrote her resume! It was under my ceaseless push that Erio was able to call them up herself. Actually, I'm more like a guardian than a boyfriend. Meme-san and I occasionally help Erio, whose goal is to eventually walk under the sun without her 'craziness'… Crap, isn't this basically a relationship of a couple and their daughter?

“You can still go back to school if you don't go to work.”

Ever since she spoke her mind about going to work, I recommended many times for her to go back. Yet Erio stubbornly refused: “Since I left, there is no going back. No!” Then why do you leave that uniform hanging in the room?

...Oh well, I *am* the person who forced her to live as an earthling. Just how much am I allowed to intervene in the choices of Erio's future? I am still searching for the answer, and I have not found it.

But seriously, am I like Erio's dad now? I'm actually worrying about whether she should go back to school or get a job. Am I the right person for this kind of thing? Having adaptability is good, but being so easily swayed is also…

The shadow of Youth-points dwindled. A nostalgic brown dyed my school life, like a withered cherry blossom that reminds people of a sweet and sour past… Hold it, I'm not about to have my cheeks wet by nostalgic tears.

“Then… Let's go to the food joint by the street.”

“Mm.”

I remembered inadvertently seeing the hiring criteria of that place being under the age of forty, when I went there with Ryuushi-san last week. Since there isn't a minimum restriction, there shouldn't be a problem. As for whether she fits, that would be up to the interviewer to decide.

Moving forward on the bicycle, I tried to pick routes that wouldn't overlap with the ones Erio used to go to the sea with.

I only hope that… For the person who has lost what's most important to her life in this town, this could serve as an atonement.

The result of her leaving out the back door dejectedly after entering the office-like room inside the kitchen went according to my prediction. So of course I'd look away. As to what I should look at after turning ended up bothering me. I guess I'll have to stare at the tip of my shoes. It was pointless.

Erio briefly explained that the people downright rejected her instead of telling her 'we'll call you if if you're hired.' After that, she hid her face… with the ground. She squatted by the wall and literally stuck her face to the concrete ground. You're gonna get hurt! I almost opened my mouth to remind her, but I thought, maybe she's already hurt everywhere? Hence I stayed mute till the end. I also thought that it'd be better if Erio stopped this behavior.

The fact that she just got a hair cut and was dressed neatly created an even bigger gap between her act. I crouched next to Erio and stared at the grey building in front. I suspected that my eyes lost focus, making the white seemed turbid. I rubbed them, and lifted my eyelids up high to see — the building was still grey.

The Erio who was still rubbing her face against the ground suddenly shot her torso upward. Her nose had a scratch, red like in the winter cold.

From that wound I felt an unnamed guilt: like mixing a neatly placed tofu in a plate with a metal spoon.

Perhaps calm again, Erio choppily described the interview.

Their questions seemed to have nothing to do with the job.

'Aren't you that? The girl who walks around town with a futon.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Oh, you don't go to school? I thought so!'

'Is your hair natural? Eh? You didn't dye it? Oh~ ...Touwa… Erio? Are you a foreigner? Oh, you're not.'

'You're pretty well known in town! I thought you're pretty brave, walking in the streets like that! Hm~ but why are you so scared now?'

'Yeah! I know you want to work here… But, you wouldn't hire a weirdo, right? Listen: just imagine you're running a store — you would think people in futon are weird too, right?'

'Well, you are really cute, so that's not too bad.'

'I'm more concerned with whether it'd dangerous working with you, not with if you can do it. Because people would be worried!'

'So, I'm sorry, but, we can't hire you. I think other places will be just as difficult too, right?'

'Anyway, keep at it! I'll cheer you on!'

Above are the notes I've taken in this one-sided interview.

“Ah~...” So they knew? I even tried picking a place that's further away from the Touwa household.

Why did you choose us? Or, why do you want to work? They didn't even ask questions like these. Erio and I even brainstormed together beforehand and came up with realistic responses.

Would it be better to ask Maekawa-san, who shares the unique appearance but with a better sociability, for advices and places to work? In any case, we have to restart.

Erio stumbled on her first step back to society. Or rather, she hugged on the ground the ankles of society, and got kicked away cruelly. Her wish of returning to society might never be granted.

The fact that her starting line wasn't zero is also tricky. Just how many points in debt awaited her?

Even when I got up and called her name, her knees refused to straighten up. If we go back home like this, she'll just end up becoming a bamboo-blind girl and cease all activity in her room. I even worried that she might regress back to the state of futon girl. Falling down again in that outfit, Erio will definitely never stand up on her own again.

"…What a pain." Or maybe I'm overprotective? I began to feel anxious.

Sigh, I just have to change her mood. I gave up on contemplating and spoke:

"Anything you want to buy?"

"Eh?" Erio, who fretfully tried to rub her frown away, lifted her chin.

"Or anywhere you want to go. Since we're already out, let's hang out for a bit before going back. It's almost noon anyway, so we can eat too." As for the reason, it's because I smelled Youth-points.

Let's just pretend it is so.

I pulled on Erio's right wrist and guide her up. Erio didn't resist; she evolved from an amphibian to a human.

As I wiped her slightly messy face, she coughed heavily. The stiffness in her facial muscle seemed to be expelled along with the cough, and it became catalyst of her return to neutrality.

"Are you hungry?"

"Mm."

"Uh, what do you want to eat?"

"Pizza." So it is going to be that?

"Roger. Then… Let's go to a diner."

Erio stuffed her lower body into the basket again. By now, I could only admit that that is Erio's standard behavior. Besides, if she hugged me from the seat behind, my spine as a guardian might deform. Maybe it'd better if we keep our distance. But from the angle of Youth-points, of course riding double is more… Well, what can I say?

Perhaps, or rather most certainly, Erio will wrap herself up right when she gets home. But I sensed that her level of depression had been ameliorated to a point that she will still crawl out from her bed when dinner comes. Erio is fine: she might be slower than a cow, but she will be back.

She is still holding on.

She has been pulled back bit by bit by the gravity of society, hence she declared her intention to work.

What proof do I have though? When all is said and done, with whom do I have comparison for her with this 'will'? Places in my head hurt as if bruised, but since I have no basis for a reply, I could only endure the pain.

Simply put, I am not negative, and rather believe in Erio optimistically. Because it was only that, I felt terribly generous.

From then till about three, Erio and I wandered around town. And thus, I experienced why the kanji of wandering (うろつ) and lost (さまよう) are the same (彷徨) with my waist and legs. Together, we became hobos in front of the station; 'You're going to be sore tomorrow.' The Erio who swung her legs in the basket so said. I pinched her cheek as punishment, and returned to the Touwa residence.

After dumping the bicycle into the storage and locking up, I came to the entrance. Erio's standard head-hanging disappeared, her expression the same as when she came out from the salon this morning.

“I'm home!” Since Meme-san's shoes sat at the entrance, I tried greeting. “I'm home~” Erio mimicked me, squeaking a weak voice into the empty hall.

No reaction of a family member appearing after biting the bait. Could she be hiding in the futon again to set a trap for another princess carry? Just like with squeezing a Youkan out of a bamboo, I wanted to tighten the futon and force Meme-san out.

Since she's not coming out, it'd be a waste of time just standing. And so I told Erio to come inside. I thought that she resembled a certain robot boy, waiting for other people's command and couldn't make up her mind otherwise. But, since checking status is not a simple task in real life, the difficulty has risen dramatically.[31]

“We're having snack, go wash your hand.” I jokingly spoke in a kid-spoiling grandad voice. “Mm!” She nodded intently and ran along the hallway… Eh? No way, she bought it? Eri-chan is too innocent, grandpa is scared that you might get scammed out there. Family members who are against their kids getting a job, and are for their them to stay at home should be pretty rare.

The happy Erio stopped in front of the living room, her mouth wriggled. She seemed to be talking with someone inside, probably saying hi to Meme-san. She ran off toward the bathroom; the other person probably didn't even get to say anything. I just bought her chocolate crepe earlier though! As expected of a girl — does sweet not count as food for them? Instead of snacks belonging in a different stomach, I secretly theorized that maybe they are put into a different organ. I had a friend who advocated this: 'maybe girls have a sweets-sack? Like a fire-sack in those monster atlas. I thought of that when I saw how much my girlfriend likes chocolate.' This became a fuse. Of course, the others exploded out of jealousy.[32]

The sound of a distant pipe becoming a highway came; I followed into the hall. In the living room, the lazy house owner was indeed in there. She was currently displaying the status between lax and waste.

Meme-san sat on a cushion, her legs freely extended toward the television. She looked oblivious, and her eyes only half focused. Maybe I was thinking too much, but her side face looked blushed.

As for clothing, it was a pajama that seemed all too early.

On the TV screen was the protagonist who swore to become a violin maker on a date with a girl. It was a movie that endangers all the idiot couples in this world: the content was highly inappropriate for the education of a bachelor. What a throwback~ I had to stop and stare at the TV. At that moment, Meme-san finally noticed my return: “Ah, welcome home… Yawn~” She tiredly lowered her head.

“I'm back. Are you sick?”

“No, no~ I'm just spacing out. Maybe I was in there for too long.”

Meme-san seemed to have cooked her tongue, vaguely explaining the situation.

Ohh, she took a bath! Now that she said it, I noticed the moisture on her hair, and her skin was extra smooth. Looks like she went into the bath before the sun went down to fully enjoy her day off. That maybe so, but she often works on the weekends too, even though she wasn't working today. What does she do for a living?

I sat down next to Meme-san and began my simple report.

“Erio got wiped at the interview.” “Yeah? I thought so.” “Me too.”

We calmly agreed with each others. It's no wonder~ Meme-san reservedly added with a bitter smile:

“She probably thought that going back to school would cost a fortune.”

“Ah. Is that right?” We talked while gazing at the TV ahead.

“Actually, she isn't wrong.” When the scene changed, the darkened plasma screen reflected Meme-san's face momentarily.

“Right.”

“And she's probably worried about being bullied, huh?”

“That's very possible.” In both imagination and reality.

“Do you get bullied at school, Mako-kun? Did anyone call you an aunt-lover (オバコン)? I'm worried.”

“Hah? You mean big foot (ヒバゴン)? Your stupid jokes made it all the way to the freakin' salon. Do you think that's bullying?”

“…...Eehee~” Meme-san ignored me. Her unmoved attitude was enough to make me wonder if she misheard me. Did she have some license-less doctor do a surgery on her that would automatically detach her ear drums when someone criticizes her?

“Is this a replay?” I suddenly change the topic.

“Nope, it's a tape. It's been gathering dust in the cabin, but I took it out out of nostalgia.”

Indeed I received a response. The suspicion of her eardrum surgery grew.

This was just a hunch, but I think nothing on the screen is being carried into Meme-san's brain. Her nerves and face were slacking off on the side of the road, making her side face appear apathetic.

Her indifferent attitude must have reasons other than over-bathing.

“Did something happen?”

“Hm? Uh, it's kind of like...” Her eyelids hung again.

Meme-san's hands swung, tracing the air aimlessly like butterflies in a mime play.

“Like always joking about how 'I'm a god~' and then someone actually came out and praised you like a god; it actually confounds you, you know?”

“...Did you meet a member of the fan club?”

What if you cunningly deceived guys who wanted to join the Erio fan club, and now there are five members? I said so while imagining and counting with my fingers.

“Dong!” Meme-san made an enigmatic sound that was irrelevant to my question, and lied down at the same time. Swoosh! Following the sound that was lighter than imagination, she came to occupy my thighs as a pillow.

“...Um, Oba-san.”

“Hm~” Her eyes rolled under her lightly shut eyelids. The hair slightly wet tickled on my legs. Under the warm object, I really thought there was a cat or a dog on my knees.

… The soft air of a lovely atmosphere floated around my eyes. Be gone! I swatted with my hands. If you have the time to spray this kind of particles, why don't you just go help Erio wash her hands.

According to the situation that should happen between a girl and a guy — not with his aunt — there seems to be a glitch in my destiny.

“How do you like your **cuchie** (キューティ) aunt lying on your knees?”

“Like having a clam on my knees.” Or more properly, juicy. (ジューシー)[33]

“Lick!” “Eeeek!” The clam licked my knee. Cold saliva sunk into the clothes and onto the skin. I yelped and winced like a girl. Though I wanted to attack her temple with a knee attack, Meme-san began her next phase of attack before I made up my mind.

“Lick lick lick lick~!”

“Hey! You damn pervert!” I pushed her forehead back with my palm.

Rhythmically she drenched my knee with her drool.

“I got a little too excited.” Teheehee~ She mimicked F*jiya's P*ko-chan. 'How careless of me~' she planned to slip by like that. She probably doesn't even care about other people's loss of points. Well no, it'd be difficult for me too if she does. Meme-san's mental status has recovered! Who would actually be glad about that? Keeping this person in warm water for the rest of the year, and a peaceful and harmonious Touwa family might just be reality.

“How do you switch so fast from depression to excitement?”

I couldn't help but feel that she uses a different fuel than regular people to stimulate herself. Would there be petroleum in the result of her saliva analysis?

“Oh yeah, listen Makkyun.”

“A nickname of a nickname… What?”

Again with the ignoring. Well, I'm used to it. Just think of it as talking to someone on the TV, and it'll be like facing twice the emptiness. I don't even know how to deal with her.

“About where Erio could work, I have something. I'll tell you now, so you two can go tomorrow.”

“...Oh?” I'm kind of impressed by this surprising information, but… “Then you should have just told me!”

That way neither my knees nor Erio would have to be exhausted from having too much lactic acid.

“I just found out today!”

“And I thought the only job that people could find taking a bath is for little ducky toys.”

“Just ask Erio and she would know where.” I began telling me the store's name and the job.

“… Ah, I see. Comparing to somewhere normal… This might be better.”

I've heard of it too, but I've never been there.

“There might not be much in terms of pay, but I think it's a place that Erio could conform to.”

Somehow, she spoke with a sentimental voice. Not fit in, but conform to? Well, they're pretty much the same thing.

“Credit's rolling on the tape.” I pointed to the screen.

“Rewind~ Also do the same to my age for about twenty years.” I flip and continued rolling.

“If I could do that, I'll throw in a bonus of doubling that.”

“Oh yay!” She nonchalantly raised her hands and stabbed with me with her nails.

Pitter-patter~ Erio frantically rushed in from the hallway. After seeing Meme-san using my knees as pillow, she stiffened still for a bit. Meme-san was relatively soft, the example being her face.

“Wanna join me, Erio?” Please don't invite your daughter in disregard of the will of the pillow! Actually, if a person has to ask for her furniture’s permission to sleep, she might simply be a wacko.

Erio waved her hands furiously in refusal. Drops of water from her hand hit my face.

After motioning an item-moving gesture to show 'enough about that for now,' she asked with tilted head:

“Snack?”

“You are the snack~!”

Like a plant growing at three-thousands times the speed, Meme-san entangled Erio with her vines known as arms: “Uuwhoa~! Bouncy skins~! Let me absorb it~! In every way~!” If you accidentally took her age, then you'll be extra skip-the-rest, Oba-san!

Erio, ravaged to the ground, stuck her hand out for the possibility of a rescue:

“Cousin, s-save me.”

“Let me finish this first.”

I acted as if fixed to the TV, deciding to turn a blind eye on the scene of a happy family.

… Yet, a side glance would reveal a prideful mom and/or idiotic mom sucking on her daughter's cheek.

Is there a problem in this world that would trouble her indefinitely? I might end up having a fever myself wondering about this question.

The next morning, Erio had a tantrum. She hid in the futon… Uh, like actually under it, since she wasn't rolled up in it.

Like a student struggling till the last moment in his bed when the chicken replacement, his mom, launches an attack on his fortress in the winter's moment between dream and reality, she resisted. She either escaped without checking the direction, or kicked randomly.

“I rerly hervent slerp yet~!”

“Liar!” By the way, her vigorous claim was: “I really haven't slept yet~!”

The thoughts of the futon-made darkness 'Ohohoho~”: Erio slept before ten o'clock last night; the time was now ten in the morning.

“Eets dergerous becerse the werve of sperce will cerse rain terday!”

“If weather forecast does send a rain alert because of your space wave, then I will gladly accept it. Alright, now get out!” I tickled her feet. “Uwah!” A clear reaction, followed by a kick to my chin. And then Erio wormed like a caterpillar when I let go. Her escape wasn't completely despicable; it was more like a child throwing a tantrum.

Like an infant scarred for life after touching a stove for the first time, Erio displayed an act of denial for job interviews. What a lack of determination she's showing. Agh, I take back the words 'I believe in her.'

Ahh~ The back-to-society points are regressing in no time. Ugh, well, she's probably numbed from it since she's already so far in debt anyway.

Actually, she originally claimed to be an alien as an escape from the problem anyway: running away has to be her one expertise — no, it has to be her basic behavior. But things are different this time. 'It wers for the cersin that I cried.'

Shouldn't the one crying be your mom? I almost said it, but I thought Meme-san wouldn't react that way. She will always respect her daughter's will. Though she will help her on her way back to society, Meme-san will neither assent nor dissent; she will unconditionally accept what Erio says.

“Rersts are needed for work. Wrapped up in yer bed is the rerght way to live!”

On the other hand, my cousin emitted her craziness to her content.

After being treated with temporary nonreaction, Erio peeked out from the futon. She surveyed about and, for some reason, sighed in relief after seeing me.

Since it made no sense, I jumped over to hold her neck; Erio frantically pulled her head back and rolled in attempt to distance herself. “Ah!”

Peril filled Erio's path. But I didn't stop her.

Her ankle met the telescope's tripod that sat in the corner of the room. “Uwhoooa!” Super effective. Erio, who could only perform lateral movements, intensely moved vertically; the floor squeaked. Musty dust flew everywhere, and I felt uncomfortable.

“Kyah~hah~hah~hah~!” Struggling painfully, Erio choppily screamed with a sound that could become a hearty laugh with a bit of editing. Once she settled, I assumed persuasion mode:

“Looks like it's more dangerous indoor for you. This morning's fortune said Sagittarius have good luck with money, and their charm is a white umbrella. So, we're going outside to get collect some lucky-points!”

Even though I lied. But I don't even know what Erio's birthday is, and how else could I further promote this point system?

“Okay, game time's over! Put your toy (futon) back, we're leaving~”

Though I tried telling her with a gentle attitude fit for kids, she insisted on 'it's warm~' jumping occasionally 'Jumpy~' then 'sleepy~ sleep~' and finally stopped moving. After about two minutes, sounds like snoring broke the silence.

“...Hah~” I rubbed saliva on my head and began meditating. Dot, dot, dot, ding~ [34]

Alright, just carry her out! A motion last seen long ago: I carried the futon girl out of Erio's room. “Warmth~! Warmth~!” The time for protest is over. Her outfit is perfect for rain too.

If the sight of me carrying Erio was caught by a certain problematic person who would ask 'magic mirror on the wall, who is the youngest Meme-san in the Touwa family of this town~?' she might start yelling 'stop those fingers!' and request being princess carried, so I hurried to the entrance. Luckily, I wasn't caught. Maybe she went somewhere? I realized after checking the shoes at the entrance.

Because Meme-san said 'I know those people there, so it's fine,' I put sandals instead of shoes on Erio. As for her messy bed hair, I couldn't care less.

I opened the door after picking up a plastic umbrella. The outside today was like a preview to the raining season: a gloomy drizzle. Riding a bicycle on a day like this and sliding all the way to the destination would probably result in a shower of Youth-points. It's just that that would be pretty dangerous, and I've already been sick once.

I pulled the bicycle out from the storage and put the luggage named Erio into the basket. Holding her, I felt she was like a light and soft mortar. The basket clanked; Erio was now in her spot. Oh man, I'm seriously used to it. Does this mean my points are already negative?

Human adaptability is terrifying; my youth is also being trained in a negative way.

With how things were now, Erio seemed to have given up as well, showing her face and initiating a normal conversation:

“Good morning, cousin.” Her eyes weren't filled with hatred: it was just a flat greeting no different from the usual's.

“Oh~ Morning… Oh yeah, Erio, hold the umbrella for me.”

I wanted her to stick her hand out to hold the opened umbrella.

Wouldn't holding the umbrella from the basket cover both me and Erio from the rain? Discovering her surprising usefulness, I felt sunny for a moment.

“And then? Where are we going?” Ah, she's pouting unhappily. This fresh reaction was kind of cute. I looked up to the umbrella, and, as if reporting to grey sky made obscure by the transparent plastic, my mouth gaped.

At the same time I thought… Are the aliens watching us through the dense cloud?

“The grocery store that sells seventh-dimensional key chain. I heard that your job is to substitute for the granny there.”

'The old lady has been resting inside recently, you two can just walk in there.'

Since Meme-san said so yesterday, I decided to walk in directly.

The store's door and roof had a few red and other brightly-colored signs stuck on them — an appearance of a classic personal shop. I parked next to the entrance. After learning our destination, Erio's mind and face seemed to be mixed with joy.

I looked for the name buried in the signs and found that the it seemed to be called 'The Tamura Shop.' For a store that is known for its alien-loving granny, this was a name that even an Earthling like me could understand at a glance.

In front of the store was a bench that seemed to be jacked from a bus stop. Currently, Erio gestured to me explaining that she used to eat snacks with her friends here after school.

By the way, I had to exercise the use of force to take away the futon, which she was about to use as a coat.

“Hoh~?” Erio has friends! Uh, I mean, of course, but what do you call it — like imagining the childhood of your parents, it isn't easy to picture the past of a person before you two met. I may have seen a picture of Meme-san from twenty seven years ago, but it is only remembered in still image, and it will absolutely never move. I do feel that her personality probably hasn't changed.

I pushed the noticeably aged, wooden slide door open. Perhaps installed improperly, the door didn't move all the way until I put some strength into it. After I opened the door, Erio squeezed by and jubilantly ran into the store.

Right as she entered, an electronic buzzer rang inside the dim store as a red object flashed on the register. Looks like every time someone comes in, a sensor will react and inform the old lady inside: a similar device as those in a convenience store.

I roughly surveyed the store with its walls and shelves brimming with items.

The same style on the inside: instead of being more traditional, this store emphasized more on the owner's personal taste. There were instant ramen with the expiration date indeed being in the future, and hot water. Dessert-wise, there were snacks, and there were also commercial ice cream in the small fridge.

“Oh, is this it?”

I took the rumored seventh-dimension key chain off the wall and investigated… No matter how I looked, it still looks like a purple accessory with multiple polygons stacked together. Is seeing through three dimension the limit of my eyes? And for the key chain over there with the word 'determination', how many dimension is that? After all, this is the territory of the mind~ Hard to say~ How philosophical. I'll tell myself that.

If we want to have a serious discussion, we might end up delving deep into an investigation on 'what is determination (根性)?' so I stopped. After all, there is still the word nature (性根). Is this about the origin of personality?[35]

In addition, there was a signature of an alien named something-something and a specimen of a Nozuchi. I'll pretend I didn't see those. I can't believe adults seriously let their kids in here![36]

“Are we… going in?” Erio asked, pointing to the darkness ahead. “Yeah.” I concluded the perusal, proceeded next to the register, took off my shoes and walked in. We entered the living quarter with Erio in lead.

The neighboring building connected to the store was wooden as well, but it was a sublime house that showed no sign of tipping. Rain dropped quietly, and a refreshing cool suffused in the air. Even though this was space of gloom and brown, conspicuous stains, I felt, for some reason, that I was in a blue cave. “Probably… Here.” Erio stopped her in the middle of the hall. At the wall was a room sealed by two slide doors.

I opened the doors yellowed by the light and age. In the center was a slightly bulging bedding. It would appear that the person is someone who sleeps with the sheet over her head, as I couldn't find any exposed skin.

"Obaa-chan." Erio set next to the bedding, endearingly calling the bulge.

"Yes, yes, I was just about go to the store!" The person explained while poking her head out from the bed. Much blackness remained in her hair, but compared to Oba-chan, she had an overwhelming amount of wrinkles. The granny's cheeks were thinned, and her eyeballs protruding. Hm…? I think I've seen this face before. Must be my imagination.

Before looking at us, she asked, 'who are you again?' An appointment with memory loss.

"Obaa-chan, um… Morning, how are you? It's been a while."

It would have sounded fine if she spoke slowly, but Erio hurriedly put everything into a sentence. Well, that *was* just like her style.

The granny, Tamura-san, stuck out her skinny arm, which had skin so tight that even the wrinkles didn't stand out. But her hand stopped without moving forward. "Ah~ Earth's gravity is becoming worse than before." The granny spoke shocking words. Is the so-called gravity something that would change in years like the economy? I wasn't surprised though. Setting my personal expectation aside, I have already gotten used to this kind of talk.

I held Tamura-san's hand and guided it to her reading glasses. "Oh… Hm, thank you then."

She mumbled vaguely and put the glasses in front of her eyes instead of putting them on. The object became the translator for her eyes, making outlines of the world correct.

"Oh~ Oh~ Elliot. You're Elliot, right?"

"No, I'm Erio."

"Since you're Elliot and Meme's kid, Elliot is fine, hm?"

Contrasting her appearance, her tone was imposing. Forward and ahead, her speaking speed was like words were pushing each others ahead, and they were very understandable. This was a tone that reveals a strong nature, but disallows others to express their opinion.

According to the previous statement, Obaa-chan knows Erio's father?

"Being Meme's kid, you actually inherited Elliot's good points. You have a bright future!”

Tamura-san's left hand that seemed unable to defy gravity came out trembling from the bed. The hand stayed in the air as if planning on petting Erio's hair, but it went back halfway, probably thinking that it was too much work.

“What about you?” This time she pointed the frame of the glasses at me, and asked:

“An unfamiliar face. If I forget, then my apology. Well, that would never happen anyway!”

Perhaps her memory had yet to decline, she asserted that we've never met. That's correct, but then what about what she said earlier?

“Ah, I'm Niwa Makoto. Erio's cousin.”

“Yes, cousin.” Somehow, Erio reported with a happy face. Tamura-san moved her glasses to observe my face. Through the reading glasses, even her face becomes bigger for me.

“Oh~oh, is that so? You're Shouji's son, of course you'd look alike.”

“Ah… Yes, he's my father.”

“I know~ he's someone with a low threshold: an idiot like an introduction manual.”

When your father is being happily and easily insulted in someone else's reminiscing, what kind of a face do you put up as a son? Dad's impression on me has always been strict and stubborn — a father without vulnerability. Hence, this past story didn't seem real.

“He's someone who likes animals more than people, the opposite of Meme. Also recently—“

“Um...”

“What?” Perhaps because of the interruption, Obaa-san was ostensibly upset.

But we're not here to chat, so we have to conclude things first.

“So, Erio will be working here, or rather will be helping out...”

“Ah~ Ah, that's right. Correct: Meme's already told me, so I know. Now, since you're done, can I talk now? Hm?”

“...Please.” What an individualistic old lady.

“Animals.”

“Hah?”

As if mocking my dumbfound reaction, Tamura-san raised the corner of her lips:

“Did you know? The animals in town have been disappearing lately. They've been kidnapped, I tell you, kidnapped!”

“Ah, yes. I've only heard of rumors though, nothing specific.”

“Ahahaha!” This old lady doesn't fit well with a monotone laughter like 'heeheehee.'

“Yes, it has to be **cattle mutilation**.”

“……...”

As expected of the city of aliens: when things happen to animals, that's the first thing that comes to mind.

However, wasn't that proven as caused by nature or other animals?

Furthermore, there weren't corpses at the scene, so I always felt that this was not an appropriate name. Oh, well, it's fine if they were returned after being carried away for experiments by alien saucers, right? ...Hm? Why bother giving back?

“Then… I'm next!”

“Hm… Eh?” My contemplation was attacked unexpectedly; I almost choked at the moment of surprise.

“**Cattle mutilation** is about to happen to me.”

Tamura-san confidently puffed her frail chest that looked like it could no longer hold anything. Another person like this? I looked to Erio's face.

Erio was not stupefied, but instead smiling as if she came in contact with something worthy of the reaction. Ah… this old lady is like that! It has to be that.

She's like the Erio during April who grew old.

“Ah. Is that right?”

I used the more polite, but disapproving reaction for facing adults.

...And like that, Erio began working at the Tamura store.

三章　『リュウ『コ』（↑ここ大事）さんの、なんちゅーか、もやーっと』

<丹羽 真>

●デリカリー認定。	−2
●アレな叔母を膝枕したうえ、その膝を舐められまくった。	−5
●エリオの就職活動に付き合う。	−3
現在の青春ポイント合計	−9

<藤和エリオ>

●働こうと思い立った。	+3
●髪の毛さぱぱぱ。	+1
●面接で落とされた。	−4
●引きこもる（布団の中に）	−2
●駄菓子屋で働くことになった。	+2
現在の社会復帰ポイント合計	−50 （新設）

<藤和女々>

●マコ君ぎゅーぎゅーでホックホク。	+2000000
●レーロレロレロレロンパレロリロレレレレロロレロンロレロロロレロロッ	+1000000
現在の幸福ポイント合計	+3

Chapter 3 - Ryuu'ko'←(emphasis)san's, whatcha call it, trouble?

“Niwa-kun is like the right side of a crepe!”

“Eh?”

I reached for the onions rings and Niwa-kun, who sat on the opposite side, paused his hand on the fries.

“It has a light crusty taste, but that's it. It's, like, the parts with no filling.”

“Oh, meaning that I have to admit myself as a shallow paper-man with a 'yeah…'? I mean, I won't deny it, but my heart might get folded into a quarter. Maybe I'll just turn into a crane and jump out from the window!”

Niwa-kun scowled sadly and put a fry in his mouth, then he rubbed the salt off onto the tray.

“Oh no, I mean, like, there are people who like that stuff too. I think there musta be a lotta people who like the crusts.” I nodded and took a bite on the onion ring. Nom, nom, delicious~

“That's the first time I've seen someone eating onions so happily.”

“Hm? Ya don't like onions, Niwa-kun?”

“Not when it's just onions — especially when it's raw, 'cuz it's spicy.”

“Oh~ Are ya one of those who hate things before tasting them?”

“Uh, didn't I just tell you about the taste?”

Ah, he's right. Niwa-kun grimaced; I smiled embarrassingly.

“In the collective item known as 'crepe with filling,' do I fall under the needless parts? After all, if you all you want are the crispy parts, you just have to grill the middle parts.”

“But isn't is bad without those too? Like, ya can't hold the filling without the sides, and it isn't a crepe anymore.”

“Then… Right, just don't even have crepes! Burgers are in, anyway; just tell crepe shops to give up!”

“Ah, you're right! Niwa-kun, you're really good at being reasonable!”

"...This girl… Just when I wish she'd deny something, she'd give me a big smile."

Bonk~ Niwa-kun collapsed… Hm? Did I… say something weird?

Niwa-kun is just that — interesting, but hard to get sometimes.

"Oh, I know!" I tried to snap… And failed. My fingers just rubbed together lamely.

"Hm?"

"I like the crust!"

"Puwah!"

"Oh oh! You look like a tipped fish tank!"

Did the Oolong tea and his windpipe play a prank on him?

...Mm, there was a day like that anyway.

That was in the beginning of June, about two weeks ago, when I had this conversation with Niwa-kun at the burger place.

You want to know how I felt? It's a bit difficult to say out loud! But it was the most recent happy time we had, so sometimes I think about it.

Mainly when I'm feeling tired and down.

Though I'm always sleepy in morning classes after practice, to the point where I miss my bed, the feeling of freedom will always come after club activity ends after school; I wouldn't want to go home directly, it's unbelievable.

For negative emotions, the feeling during class time is pretty important.

"Hey ya~ Ryuushi!"

When I was wiping the gym floor with a mop, Mikki, my club mate, came to my side and spoke. She's a girl cuter than Ryuushi who came from the city part of town.

"How can I help ya, ya naughty kid who got Ryuuko-san's name wrong?"

Just how widespread is this erroneous nickname of mine? Could it be the entire school? Jeez, Ryuushi-san is so famous; she's honest and flexible… Wait, now's not the time to feel happy!

"Before we head home, wanna go hang out at Tamura's?"

As for why this girl's nickname is Mikki, it's because she likes that one mouse in a certain park. Even though she's a girl, she's not M*nnie. Don't make me say the rest! By the way, she's a tough one who can go enjoy an amusement park on her own.

“Obaa-chan's store? Mm~...” I felt my tummy through the uniform to confirm multiple things: “Sure, it's been a while.” During the winter of first grade, I often went there after club activity.

“You're cooperative sometimes, Ryuushi~”

“I told ya it's Ryuuko! And no one ever says that!” Sigh, because… I've been hanging out with Niwa-kun recently.

But speaking of Niwa-kun, he's been having the habit of leaving as soon as school's out this week. Did something happen? My curiosity rolled like a ball in the bottom of my heart.

Was I too cruel refusing his offer? That's going to be… problematic~

Our job was finished after we wiped the floor. On our way to the changing room in the gym, we traded a 'good job guys~' with the volleyball team that we passed before leaving.

I opened up the cellphone left sitting in my bag to check for messages… Yay~ the battery is fully charged. Hahah… Hmph, I'm sick of seeing the black numbers in my calendar; I don't even have a day off. Seriously~ a birthday is a personal holiday, why not just take the day off? Just kidding— my birthday is at the end of month!

Today was the eighteenth of June. About ten more days. Mom always buys me delicious (but expensive) cake! I'm so excited!

“Hmm~” I stretched, my spine crackled and the elbows followed as if complaining. A surge what felt like energy came from my feet.

Tomorrow is Saturday, awesome! And that's why today's club ended on an especially high note. Even the weather was the rare sunny day during rainy season. The only problem was the humidity, like melting snow, sticking to the skin as if 'ah, it's going to rain!'

“Sorry for the wait, Ryuushi! Stripping so fast as usual, eh?”

Mikki, who came out later than I did, spat lines that would lead to misunderstanding and pat my shoulder.

“You're just slow! Whatever~ Let’s go.”

I pointed to the bicycle lot and strode forward proudly. Walk, walk, walk… Run, run, run. I switched to running halfway to catch to Mikki who outpaced me.

“You walk slow.”

With her usual expression of slight apathy, Mikki, who's my height, criticized me.

“A walk should be with a relaxed mind, s’what I believe.”

“But you're pretty fast at running!”

“Ya may call me Cheetah Ryuuko.” Just like a certain Jaguar someone![37]

“Is it cuz you don't strip?”

“Mikki, what you say sometimes go through time and space.”

And could ya stop making Ryuuko-san into some weird character?

Ah, but 'only sometimes go through time and space' sounds like an idiom!

Walk, walk, walk mixed with some run, run, run, we came to the lot. Kendo members who also just left club were also there, chatting while getting on their bikes.

After saying a few words with some friends there, I came to the side of my ride who waited patiently for her chance to shine.

“That reminds me, we haven’t seen the dog in a while.”

“Dog?”

“The stray dog with black fur. Doesn't he sometimes come around here, and even into the school?”

“Ah~ I remember. Hm~ Maybe… He was, um, kidnapped?”

“I guess so~”

I picked up and put on the helmet that was placed upside down in the basket. Mikki saw the scene and chuckled lightly:

“It's always hilarious to see you do that!”

“Do ya wanna try it? Rather than watching, it's more fun to do it!”

“No thanks. Ryuushi and helmet are born for each other!”

She laughed. Hmm~ … It was probably a compliment! Oh well~ I opened the bicycle lock and lift the body outside of the spot, clank~ I rode forward, and then was passed by Mikki. 'Uguu~' She slowed down for me, and subtly laughed her head off. Grr, she's a quick one!

“Also, you ride super slow.”

“I've always been the kid who can't do the three-legged race.”

Even Niwa-kun was able to let off his pent up frustration after getting a new bicycle. I jokingly told him off with an angry voice, and then he said 'then… I'll ride behind Ryuushi-san.' I'm happy and all, but I told ya I'm not Ryuushi!

We rode out the school gate toward the opposite direction of our home.

When I was little, my friends and I would always hang out at the store Tamura Obaa-san runs, which we were now heading to. Everyone's parents would tell him or her that 'don't believe in anything that old lady says!' She has always been a strange lady who likes to talk about aliens.

For example, she always says things like 'Aliens don't live in this world — they live outside of it.' She also always pet our heads and say stuff like 'I hope the aliens don't take you away~'

Because she treats the aliens like gods, I dunno… I think it's more like religious beliefs.

But even so, everyone loved Obaa-chan's weird stories. Compared to teachers' 'read your books! Do your works!' we like those more… Uh, of course! But at the time, I actually looked forward to them.

Under her influence, I even ran to the astronomy lab outside of town with everyone to look for aliens. In the end, I never saw one… Oh, but maybe that one time? And it was recent, from not too long ago. I met a self-proclaimed alien.

Did that boy properly return 'home?'

“Oh yeah, Ryuushi~ Heard you got a boyfriend now, is it true?”

“Wha?” I swirled, almost bumping into Mikki's bike.

“Ah, looking at your reaction, it must be true!” Mikki continued riding calmly.

“Ugh, no… I'm just surprised because I, the normal Ryuuko, have rumors!”

“That's why you're surprised?”

Mikki shot me a belittling look. How would you know as a basketball varsity member.

“But, boyfriends, huh… Hm~ I have no idea what ya mean.”

Oh, does she mean Niwa-kun? I only realized after speaking, so I didn't lie!

Is it because I eat lunch with him?

“You know what they say: 'there is no wave without wind.'

“Does that mean where there is no wave, the wind doesn't blow~?”

“Ryuushi, have you ever think about what you say?”

“Hmm~hm, never.” Hehehe, I tricked her.

After a bit of chatting, we were at the Tamura Shop. We parked next to the store; besides us, there was already a bicycle there. As if lining up, we put the bicycles into a row. Just when I took off the helmet and put it in the basket, Mikki laughed again.

Vending machine, bench with paint falling off its legs, tilted signs that was never changed, and the window that's blurred by age.

Under the push of nostalgia and my own past, I pulled open that wrongly installed slide door:

“Obaa-san, good afternoon~”

I consciously greeted the old lady who should always be sitting inside the store.

“Ah—“

The right hand I lifted petrified at the fingertip, because my prediction was way off.

Due to my stopping in the track, Mikki ran into me; I could even hear her complaining 'what are you doing~?' But my neck stiffened, unable to turn.

The other person was probably shocked as well: she dropped the bag of potato chips in her hands, and then hurriedly picked up the bag to her chest and stared over here.

“Oh, it's the thing inside of the futon roll.”

Mikki observed the inside over my shoulder, rudely pointing at the person. FYI, if someone points at M*ckey Mouse and tells her 'so the person in there…' she will give whomever said it a serious slap. Not that it's irrelevant.

Even Touwa Erio-san, whose history is like a flaw, began to reveal a suspicious reaction; she still lowered her head and nodded meaninglessly. I stared at the friend I came with.

"......"

"......"

What is this awkwardness? Is it because I haven't seen her without the futon for a really long time?

No, there seemed to be reasons other than that.

Only, I think Touwa-san's and I were awkward for different reasons.

We gazed at each others uncomfortably with downcast eyes, and then…

"Touwa...E...rio-san." I almost blurted something like Eru-rio.

"You're… Ryuushi...What's-her-face..." Just as her usual uncertain speech, her words did not contain the correct answer.

I said my name is Ryuuko!

"Looking at this bench, it looks like a bus would totally stop by."

"*Breathing* (Seriously)!"

"Ah, if a cat bus comes, then it'll be purrfect~"

Meow~ Mikki had on an immodest face. She's very knowledgeable in that kind of things, addicted and even completely obedient to cute things. As for the same rule, I only half agree.

We sat on the Tamura Store's bench outside, sipping on the cup ramen we just bought. Mine was fried noodle, and Mikki's Ramen flavor. Ramen has soup, so would it make people fatter? Constantly worrying about this subtly, I always choose fried noodles. But I still eat Ramen when it's out of stock.

Though we talked, my gaze was mostly not on the noodles or Mikki, but floated into the store. Even if the store was dark, the light fortunately lit up the inside, so I could peek through the glass. I could only the right-half, but Touwa-san's interestingly colored hair will occasionally enter my sight, reflecting the scene of her cleaning. And thus, I stared continuously.

"What's wrong, Ryuushi?" Mikki slurped on the ramen, poking my side with her elbow.

"I said to call me Ryuuko, Mikki!"

“What, does Erio bother you that much?”

“Not really~”

“Hm, it's only natural. Why is she working at a place like this?!”

Mikki, who just ignored my words, tasted the shrimps in the cup and nodded. If it's just the second half, I too agree it is unbelievable. Now that I think about, the futon-roll hasn't been around lately~ I did thought so.

“But, like, wouldn't it be better if we don't come anymore?”

“Eh? Why?”

Suddenly hearing her say that we should avoid coming here, I looked to Mikki. She began her explanation only after sucking, chewing and swallowing a few noodles:

“Cuz Erio's here!”

“Hm, ok...”

“Now isn't the time to stop thinking, Ryuushi!”

“Ryuuko!”

“Think about what happened at school. I'm gonna be frank — Erio is mental. You don't want to be seen around her, right?”

“Ah...”

The roots of Mikki's idea sprouted from the mud; I had to agree.

I remember the scene when Touwa-san reappeared after missing for half a year. Even during class time, she didn't care… During lunch, she would even drive everyone out of the room… The situation at that time was really bad.

We weren't in the same class in first year, so I wasn't a complete victim. Seeing her wearing that futon around, I even thought 'that's pretty cute' so I didn't hate her.

But it's so complicated! Especially with Niwa-kun. N-no, Niwa-kun and I are just friends.

“Letting Erio welcome customers. Doesn't that seem more like unwelcoming them?”

“Uu… Oh! Isn't it cuz of that?”

“Because of what?”

“Because of the aliens— that's why she works with Tamura Obaa-san.”

“Oh, I see.” Mikki's reply was still filled with an attitude half of 'whatever.' “Now that you mentioned it, the old lady wasn't in the front. Is she inside?”

“Yeah, I hope she's doing ok!”

As if swayed by the topic, I stole another glance into the store. No signs of Touwa-san.

For a while we were wordless. Only the sound of sipping and drinking echoed on the damp bench.

Then, a man about forty — similar to my dad's age — came over on a bicycle and stopped a bit after the Tamura shop and us. He wore a suit, so probably a salary man? He spaced out looking up toward the store's roof. I secretly guessed, that if his one of the town's resident, he would have seen the futon weirdo. If he goes inside the shop and see the true face of the futon-roll Touwa-san, would he be surprised, or disgusted? The thought of those reactions upset me, but since the reason was also Touwa-san herself, I felt it was only natural, or not my business. In any case, emotions of all sorts blended together messily and lied in my heart. I don't hate Touwa-san, but it's kinda like 'hm…' Ah, but she did give me the nickname 'Ryuushi' in P.E so I have to take some points away.

According to Maekawa-san, Touwa-san is Niwa-kun's cousin, and they live together… Under the same roof, how shameless (ハレンチク)! If I was a disciplinary teacher, Niwa-kun would not have escaped the consequence of a shaved head. Heheh, fortunately I'm just a simple student, so he's lucky to be alive… I tried to bolster myself for a sec. Ahh~ Am I actually a very blessed girl? I dunno why, but my friends always say it~ They always call me a blessed person.

In the end, the man never walked inside and kept going forward in his bike. In the bicycle's basket there was a big cardboard box; perhaps of its weight, he struggled with jaw clenched to peddle. Mikki stopped her chopsticks as well, shooting her gaze at the man who had just left. I saw the box he was carrying. It was cola…I think? If the label on the box was right.

Oh! Ryuuko-san's English ability has finally appeared boldly for the sake of a chance! It might be hard to believe, but I am actually certified with level three English! But nothing for the Kanji examination that I took at the same time.[38]

“Are those stolen?”

"Hard to say. Probably not."

"Then it must be Otonakai!"

"Hm, Otonakai." [39]

Mikki and I traded looks and nodded, and both of us smiled for some reason.

"Are those all for himself?"

"Maybe he won it in some event, like a kid's party or something."

"Mm… Maybe. Or maybe he's just a cola addict."

"Mikki can read what's on the box! Tch~"

"Are you looking down on me?"

While laughing, we sucked on the remaining noodles.

"Also, did you see that guy's ear?" Mikki pointed to departed back and asked.

"Eh? Does he have big ears?"

"No~ I meant the thing he had on his ear. What was that?"

"Oh~..."

Mikki, who drank all of the soup, asked her question again just as I finished:

"I've actually talk to that guy before!"

"Eh?"

"He asked a lot about Erio, so I told him at my discretion."

"Oh~..." So Touwa-san is someone dangerous enough to be followed by that guy?

Maybe Mikki's attitude of 'a true man will not stand beside a collapsing wall' is correct!

As of Niwa-kun… Hm~ Is it because he's not a true man?

"What do we do with the garbage?"

"Wuu..." If it were before, Obaa-chan will always say 'I'll take it' and take them for us.

I naturally looked inside the store.

...Ah, there was someone else besides Touwa-san. A male student stood next to her as if taking care of her.

Was he in there earlier? Also, the bike that was there… Kuh, the mystery has been solved.

“It's ok, just bring them back!” I waved my hands and said: “No!”

“Hm? Sure, I don't like letting Erio help me anyway.”

“Hmhm.”

I brushed her off with a sound and stood from the bench. Mikki got up as well.

We patted our skirts, circled into the store toward the bicycles.

Just before leaving, I looked back once. There was nothing inside.

“Oh right. Ryuushi, free tomorrow?”

“It's Ryuuko. What’s up?” I turned back while replying.

“Wanna go buy some accessories? I found some super cute stuff!”

“Tomorrow, huh...” Because it's a Saturday, there is no club, and the weather seemed good. “I’ve already made plan, sorry.”

What I saw in the store was way more important than hanging out with friends.

It is probably, for now.

When Niwa-kun first transferred here, I thought maybe he had become, to me, a kind of 'candy.' This is what I thought of when I ate alone during lunch.

How do I put it? Like the sort that is put on the side, when you wanna take a breather or if your mouth is a bit lonely, the candy that you'd want… Did I think of him like that? I wondered.

When we're alone, someone I can easily say hi to… That kind of feeling.

That's why sometimes when I'm alone, I feel stuffy.

I dunno why, but that's what I think.

Hmmmng. I start to realize how strange this whole thing is.

The rain got stronger as well. No doubt that this is the summer rain — rather than sinking into the body, it sticks onto your body along with things other than just water. Because of the humidity, clothes glued tightly on me.

Splatter, splatter… The sound of rain falling on the asphalt road and rooftops almost made me lose my calm. Every time it happens, I would concentrate by repeatedly closing and opening my eyes.

Uh, firstly… Let's try to sort out the situation after coming here today.

Today was the day after yesterday, so Saturday. My reason for not hanging out with Mikki was, in simple terms, to keep an eye on the Tamura Shop. As for why, it's because yesterday… I discovered Niwa-kun in the store. How shameless! Well, I dunno why I'm so angry either.

Because Mikki, a potential bomb, was there yesterday, I just went home. However, if Niwa-kun does show up today, I will assault him with a 'bang!' I planned so and left home this morning.

Around ten o'clock in the morning, I rode to where the Tamura Shop is and hid in the corner to monitor the entrance — this was the so-called 'Tailing.' Who would have known that watching the alien headquarter — the astronomy lab — would become useful on day? I seemed to have gotten bored of it quickly then and played ball instead.

Looking back at past experience, I prepared beforehand a music player to let my favourite music absorb the boredom. At the same time, I stuck closely to a wall to quietly watch the store. The song that played in my ears was a drama or movie theme released a year ago by a female singer named 'Nijou Owari' (二条オワリ). The singer wrote in her history booklet that she was accidentally discovered while singing in front of a train station about six or seven years ago.[40]

It also said that she likes dogs, which made me like her more. As for her songs, the lyrics and tones known for being 'pessimistic yet cheerful' don't provide a sense of straightforwardness. After listening, I agree with the review.

'I didn't think it'd sell so well – this world is truly full of lies,' she said so with a naive smile on her first TV appearance — It left me with an impression, which is why I bought the CD and listened to it in times like now.

Mm, let's not talk about this for now. In the middle of waiting for Niwa-kun, the weather worsened as well. The sunny day of the morning collapsed; the shapes of cloud gradually changed as well. Every time when the clouds moved, the sky was as if painted many times by a brush soaked in ink. In about twenty minutes, I successfully observed with my head the first rain of the day.

Just when I decided to move to somewhere with a cover… A problem appeared.

Ugh, it's like, there were other people watching this store. Two people, actually.

One of them looked like a woman of about thirty, and the other was the Cola guy from yesterday. Since the rain began scattering, the two of them moved as if they're being chased. The problem became more obvious: because of their locations, neither of the shuffling people noticed each other's' existence — but I saw everything. I only moved after observing this scene; my shoulders were now a bit wet.

The omen of a plot loomed! Hmmm, I really don't get what I said either. Still, does everyone understand what I'm trying to say? There was some sort of a secret in this shop! Somethin' like that.

With the grocery store as the center, the female hid by the corner on the edge of the road. On the opposite side was me who hid half my body, and the cola guy. I could see the cola guy clearly, but if the woman moved a bit she'd completely disappear.

"Eh? A spotted cat sat anxiously by my legs. Was it hiding from the rain? Even when I met eyes with it, the cat didn't do anything but waited.

"Gah~" I tried to scare it with my arms raised… Ah, it actually ran away. Since when did I have the power to threaten cats? I felt a little guilty: "Come back~"

Splash~ Though I tried calling the silhouette back, my voice was drowned by the rain, unable to get its reaction.

I swallowed my tears and returned to observing the cola guy, as well as decided to be gentler next time when I meet a cat.

He wore the wrinkly suit today as well — something that has nothing to do with the weekend. There was indeed something on his ears… What are those? Things that looked like they're supposed to hang on a pet's ears. Cola guy slid his body in between the telephone pole and the wall, nervously looking left and right for something. What if, his target was also Niwa-kun…. Though I almost had this thought, I stopped in the middle. If he put on shades, he'd look like a spy from those cheesy movies. As for the Tamura Shop that's being watched by this kind of dude… The level of alien-ness suddenly rose. Was he the investigator of a certain alien department?

A certain File's mysteriousness also came from overseas. What is he here for? The signature of the alien? Maybe it hides the secret phrase that would lead to the next step of human-alien relationship. Or maybe, Nozuchi was the pet of an alien, but it was kidnapped during the recent stray animal abduction, and the guy has been looking for him all over the town. Mm~ Looks like I'm pretty wacky too. The world-view Obaa-chan planted in my head circulated like poison. If this keeps up, I might be suspected if I try to carry out my action of 'doubting common sense!'[41]

Cola guy was still looking around. Even though I was hiding, he still didn't see me. His eyes didn't seem too good. Probably because my clothes and the wall had similar colours, so they looked like one thing? I could actually use camouflage to my advantage; maybe the infiltration four months ago was a useful experience. Hold~ Hold on~ Setting Earth aside, this atmosphere was as if I'm shouldering the burden that is the existence of this town. What would happen if I was found… Wait, no, why am I so excited?

Am I a space kid who is unfit to laugh at Touwa-san? I used to like the game of 'pretend.' This hand-sweating monitor that was gradually going off-course…

“Phoo~”

“Keewah!” Someone b-b-blew air, she did.[42]

The sudden attack caused me to slide; just when I was about to land my butt on the drenched road, I was saved. The person who reach her hand out must have been the same who blew air at me. Held by another, I was able to resume my stance.

“What a close call!”

The smiling person who self-directed this crisis-and-rescue was none other than the woman I just saw. She wore a suit, and looking at her closely, there was actually some wrinkles on her face. But I don’t know how to describe it: her appearance still emits childishness. Even the umbrella she held was yellow… A color belonging to a grade schooler.

Did she see me and circled all the way behind me? Frankly speaking, what a weirdo!

“What are you doing at Tamura’s?”

"Eh? Ugh~ You are?"

"Me? You may call me the smooth-skinned sensei!"

She beamed at me an expectant smile. T-that aside, our conversations had been questions since earlier – are we running in circles?

"Here, do you want some?" The person who wished to be called smooth-skinned sensei handed me a half-finished cola. Though I took it without a second thought, I wouldn't even think about drinking it. Because the education of my mom, who taught me 'don't take anything from strangers~' is deeply seated in me. Ryuushi-san is actually considered a good kid. Well, about half… The bottle bobbed in my hand.

"Who are you waiting for with a toast in your mouth? How ambitious of you, even though it's raining."

"I'm here for a friend who is more important than my friends."

"In adolescent terms, you're worrying way too much for just a friend!"

"If I were ta think about question about where we stand, the place beneath my throat would feel stuffy."

"Mmhm, It's love"

"Is't weird?"

"Ehh, not too different!"

"Really?"

We conversed in incomprehensible words. Because I had a feeling that I must not think too deeply, I've only replied shallowly:

"What about smooth-skinned sensei? Why are you playing spy?"

"I'm not 'playing'!"

"Really?"

"Mm, it's kind of like parent visit day?"

"Oh… Well, there's actually a cola guy playing spy there too."

"A guy?" Smooth-skinned sensei's neck rolled softly. She stared at the person, 'oh, oh'ed twice with a momentary, confused glance, but immediately declared: "That's a space stalker."

"What a large-scaled stalker." It seemed like he can shoot laser beams while sneaking around?

“He is a fan of the smooth-skinned sensei – me!”

“Eh? If that’s so, then smooth-skinned sensei is a mochi from space?”[43]

“The very same one that was flattened in Apollo 11!”[44]

Just before I became the bad kid who talks with strangers, a bicycle’s brake screeched as if sliding in the rain. “Ah!” There he is!

Didn’t teachers tell us to not hold an umbrella on a bike? That boy is publically defying their teachings! “Then, I must get going!” I began preparing for a dash with some stretches. “Mm~? Ah, mm~” Smooth-skinned sensei shot the cola guy a glance and stared at me. After looking back and forth busily, she finally nodded in understanding.

“Then, I’m going!”

“Bye~”

She revealed a smile of habit for seeing someone off and waved.

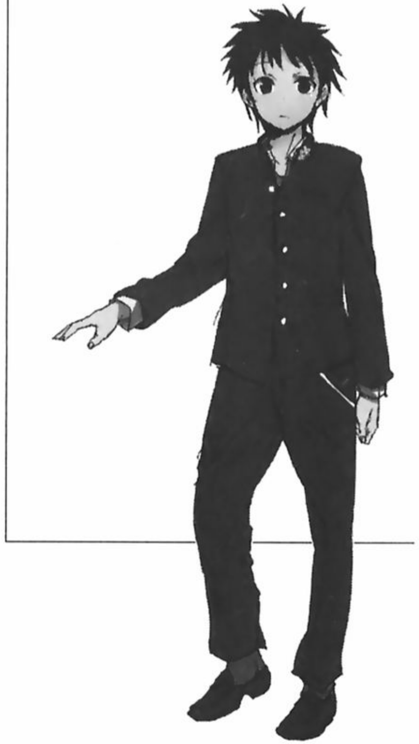
Under smooth-skin sensei’s watch, I sprinted into the store at a speed too fast for an umbrella.

When it comes to running, I am super~duper~fast~!

四章　『宇宙の町の雨中』

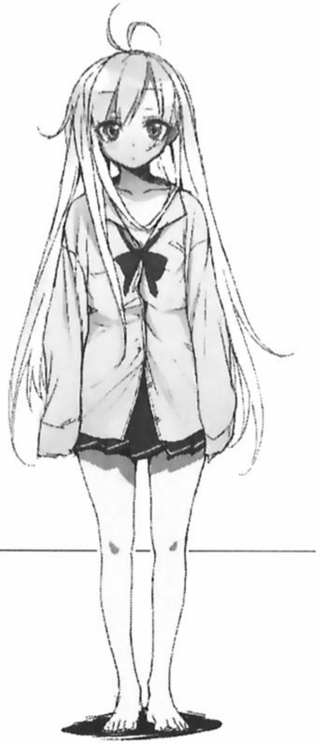
＜丹羽 真＞
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の青春ポイント合計　−9



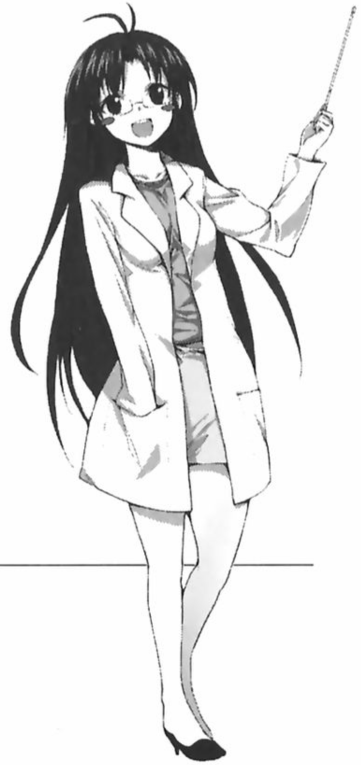
＜藤和エリオ＞
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の社会復帰ポイント合計　−50



＜藤和女々＞
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の幸福ポイント合計　+3



Chapter 4 - In the Rain of an Extraterrestrial Town

"Yo! Been doing your job?" I hadn't even greeted a curled up Erio, 'Hey~ Yeah!" when a loud Ryuushi-san in her casual shoved me from behind and surprised me.

Since today was the weekend, I went to bed late yesterday and overslept. When I woke up during noon, I spaced out for a long time before deciding to visit Erio's work on the way for food. I slid my bike here in the rain. Erio never touches the bike on her own; she would only move on her two feet. Is it a habit? Or fear? Does she have PTSD with bicycles? I was there too... Though I don't want to think of it this way, but we did almost killed ourselves. Young people are just too rash.

That's it for boring things — just as I planned on entering the muggy store, Ryuushi-san, who dashed with all her might, appeared. Her hair seemed slightly wet, carrying a tiny bit of moisture.

Running into a girl classmate on the weekend… The situation should be the boiling point for youth; yet I noticed somehow that this meeting wasn't a coincidence, unable to press down on the calculator in my mind.

Since I have been occupied with the company of Erio on her ‘return to society and other things,’ they were sort of put to the side with the attitude of 'it's not really important right now.' Even so, I still remember about the existence of my Youth-points.

“H-hi~ Niwa-kun. Touwa-san too, mornin’!”

I raised my right hand like in the movie 'S*turday Night Fever' to greet her, and then put my plastic umbrella in the stand next to the store entrance.

“...Mornin'!”

Erio lifted her body and kept a half-crouched posture with her mouth slightly opened: “Cous...” This word was cut. With nowhere to go, it returned to the stomach along with air.

On her side laid her favourite Calamus futon. Was that especially carried from the Touwa house? Or did she walk here with it wrapped on? Erio probably planned to wear that thing during a break to kill some time. If I was there, forget about tidying up this outfit that challenges the line between freedom and eccentricity, I would probably have intervened. Speaking of the girl, she actually tried to welcome customers in a futon when Tamura Obaa-chan and I were talking inside the house. She silently closed in on the customers and scared the crap out of the old lady neighbor who came to get grocery. And the owner Tamura Obaa-san assented to that kind of behavior, even though she couldn't stand it anyway. As a side note, after seeing Erio's outfit, Tamura Obaa-chan actually said:

“Like father, like son; like mother, like daughter!”

Which side of Erio's parents was this comment for? And then Obaa-san went on: 'of course! If blood goes backward, wouldn't people die? Really now! Things like going against the flow make no sense, since life is but a domino in destiny. Forget about standing out: if the flow stops, what would it even be?' Was that toward me, who sat next to her? Following my mute response, she intentionally humphed.

But now wasn't the time to ponder about the bedridden Tamura Obaa-chan. The problem was with Ryuushi-san, who came in energetically, yet subtly hostile.

“Uh… What business do you have with us today?” I rubbed my hands, asking her purpose here.

'That's my job!' I ignored Erio's protesting glace and asked Ryuushi-san.

“What business do I have, of course… Hm, I'm here to buy stuff! **Shopping**!”

She hummed, coiling her ankles toward the shelf. A flexible motion — I admired that her leg muscles were indeed trained. Shake, shake~ the fluid in the bottle Ryuushi-san held shook as well.

“Is that cola? You carried that with you?” How dare she brought that evil drink? I don't drink carbonated beverage!

“This? Smooth-skinned sensei gave it ta me at the corner there earlier!”

“………” I felt like I've heard of that name before.

It's a Deja Feel! That's it! After the word’s creation, I felt 'what kind of name is that?!' So even for her, she'd still care about how her daughter is doing at work! She visited on Erio's first day, but was promptly given an embargo, so now she snuck here. I see.

“Ah, Touwa-san...”

I don't know if Ryuushi-san knew it either, but she is currently talking with smooth-skinned sensei's offspring. Erio jumped, her shoulders wincing as if she would run into a dark corner to avoid Ryuushi-san at an instant.

Even though she stole glances of rescue at me, I decided to watch for any changes first. I'm interested in how these two would talk as well; besides, Erio wants to return to society, right?

“Uh, um… Um… Is Obaa-chan ok?”

“In… Inside.” There. With quivering fingers, Erio pointed out where Tamura Obaa-chan was. She rarely comes into the store. Or rather, she couldn't come? Her health seemed to require care.

“I see~ Uh~ Can I go say hi to her later~?”

Ryuushi-san glimpsed, her eyes alternating between me and Erio. What's going on with her today? She showed a strangeness different from the usual.

“Um!” Erio opened her mouth with the force that almost threw her forward.

“Eh?! W-what do ya want~!” Ya lookin' for a tussle~? She raised her cute fists onto her chest, readying her stance.

“We-...Wel...come.” Erio sincerely bowed down.

Do I call her serious? Or a dingus? Both? What a deep-seated problem.

And she's even giving me a smug of 'I didn't forget!' Um, if possible, do it when Ryuushi-san *just* came in, but I'll let it slide this time. After all, rather than coming in, Ryuushi-san assaulted the door.

“So, what's Ryuushi-san getting?” I turned to face the shelf on the right.

“Eh— Y-yup, I'm gettin' sumthin'!”

Ryuushi-san, who was quietly staring at the interaction between me and Erio, suddenly shone her eyes. Was she just in a computer's sleep mode? As if desperately trying to catch up with us, she hurriedly grabbed a snack off the shelf. It was a bag of chicken-flavoured potato chips. I haven't eaten this stuff lately, but apparently it's gotten more flavours now.

“Oh yeah.” I noticed something and walked deeper into the shop. Following the hallway, I recycled something in the kitchen and returned.

Ryuushi-san was still in the same pose before I left.

“Here, for you.”

“Hmm?” Ryuushi-san tentatively took the towel I gave.

“Your hair and shoulders are kinda wet.” So I thought you could use a towel.

“O-oh. Oh!”

Ryuushi-san first shown a look of slight shock, then bloomed into a smile. Was my act of kindness really so out of her prediction?

I kind of wanted know how the girl in front of me thought of my action.

“Let me take whatever is on your hands.” I further piled on the kindness. This was totally not because I've decided to change my character from a normal high schooler to a kind high schooler (with indecent intention). Really.

After putting the chips and the cola on my side, Ryuushi-san picked up the towel with two hands. She first stroked her shoulders, then gently dried the droplet on her hair. And then she sighed while holding on the straight bang that stuck to her forehead:

“Hair's gettin’ straight again, geez~ I hate it~”

“Plan on perming it again?”

“Mm~ Maybe it'd save more money if I just get an electrified-afro!”

Her tone and face didn't look like she was joking. You just can't underestimate her in this kind of situation!

Ryuushi-san paused her towel-holding hands and looked up. Probably imagining herself with an afro. If this was a manga, there definitely be onomatopoeia for warmth all around her — her relaxed face looked so.

“Would I look cool like a rock star?”

“Nope.” Feels like it'd be a fail of a healing character. A fierce criticism.

“Really~?” Tch. Ryuushi-san tutted. Just what on earth did she picture?

After wiping her neck with the towel, she finished after shaking her head; water no longer flew from her hair.

“Ryuushi-san, totally dry now!”

“You're sparkling!” I meant to say her hair. Compared to when we just met, her hair indeed had become straighter.

“Even we have become dried (embarrassed)!”

“And what does that mean?”

“Thanks for the towel~” She stopped playing around and gave the towel back cutely.

“You're welcome.”

“Niwa-kun scored three Ryuuko-san points because you're attentive!”

And what are those points? Why does everyone make the same scoring guide? There are so many out there, I can't even keep track anymore.

“What do I get after getting those points?”

“After seven points, ya won't call me 'Ryuushi' anymore.”

“What a groundbreaking scoring that punishes you for doing well!”

Even scores for breaking traffic laws make more sense.

I returned the chips and cola in exchange for the towel. “Ung~” Despite of her mumbling, Ryuushi-san turned toward Erio. “I'm getting this.”

“Thank.. yer~” Erio's response failed as an imitation of a straightforward athlete; she received the chips and ran to the register. Her flip flops slapped, and as if pouncing the box full of money, she flew. “Hun-hundred twenty yen… About.” She clumsily clicked on the register while talking to Ryuushi-san. Witnessing Erio's all-out hospitality for a customer, Ryuushi-san took out her purse, cheeks twitching, and gave the proper amount of change. Erio collected the money with rigidly curvy fingers, gripping twice on the three coins in her hand.

Only her lips arced in a smile, showing her satisfaction. Her expression bragged, similar to a child successfully accomplishing a task beyond her ability. Hm, after all, touching something that she had only watched from the side is an easily understood growth.

On a side note, Erio's job as a shop tender grants her a daily salary of five hundred yen — a coin. Even with whole month with no days-off, she'd only make about fifteen-thousand yen. For a sixteen year-old kid, it seems like a lot of allowance, but from a part-time view point, it is a lamentable number. It's just as shocking as the bleaching power of a new laundry detergent. That example may be a bit unintelligble, but in a store that runs on no more than 3000 yen a day, this amount of salary might actually be a generous treatment. I thought of this later. After all, hiring Erio is pretty much the same as letting the loss in profit be.

“Then, should I go visit Obaa-chan~?”

Ryuushi-san's gaze floated behind as if trying to peer into the back. She stared at Erio, seemingly wondering: ‘Can I?’

Erio first put the change into the register, then unhesitatingly replied:

“Ah, let me lead in you.” Erio spoke weirdly and jubilantly kicked her sandals off. Looks like she was happy to have an excuse to not wear shoes. Hm~ jobs that would not need shoes… Jobs at home?

Ryuushi-san looked at my face for no reason, creating a mien of 'aren't ya coming?' I went with the flow, deciding to head to where Tamura Obaa-chan is. I see her often recently anyway. I would go inside after checking on Erio, and take care of her if she's not feeling well, as well as listen to some old stories of Erio's. I don't know if she likes it or not, but I talk about myself too, and occasionally I hear about Meme-san too. The most shocking truth was that, summarizing Meme-san's young deeds, she's actually a slightly dumb, but honest and cute girl. Tamura Obaa-san herself even said 'Mm~ That's pretty much it, but her level of stupidity was really bad' as words of recognition. Was time and age too cruel, or did something else go wrong? Humans are truly mysterious.

With Erio in lead, Ryuushi-san in the middle, and me in the rear, the trio advanced along the hallway. With three people moving at once, the usually austere hallway bustled with sound. Was there a similar sound when Tamura Obaa-san's husband was still around? Meme-san said, though, that Tamura Obaa-san's husband passed away twenty years ago.

“Here.” Erio clarified for Ryuushi-san and opened the slide door in the hall. Inside was the usual: in the middle a slightly bulging futon. With a bit of focus, the bulge could be seen moving up and down along with its content's breathing. Obaa-chan sleeps with even her head under the sheet.

“Obaa-chan, Ryuushi is here.”

“I told ya I'm Ryuuko!”

Ryuushi-san protested against Erio's erroneous introduction, at the same time kneeling next to Tamura Obaa-san.

“Hah? What did you say? What -ko?”

Perhaps unable to hear well through the sheets, Tamura Obaa-san stuck her face out of the futon and asked sleepily.

“It's Ryuuko. Hello, Obaa-chan!” Hi~ Ryuushi-san happily greeted with a raised hand.

Tamura Obaa-san looked up to her face and right hand, and closed her eyes as if defeated:

“Who?”

“Uwee! How could ya forget the super-special Ryuushi~! I am not plain!”

As if fighting with an overhead object, Ryuushi-san's feeble fists waved in the air unreasonably.

“Of course it was just a boring joke; why are you so excited? You are Mifune Ryuuko, right?”

Tamura Obaa-san breathed out disapprovingly like a turtle mimic. “R-right… Ah, right, I was just pretending that ya tricked me, is all.” Ryuushi-san made an excuse with her face beet red.

“Makoto, glasses.” Tamura Obaa-san ordered me to hand her the glasses. Calling my name directly had been set! I calmly thought while retrieving the glasses and categorized:

Tamura Obaa-san → Makoto

Meme Oba-san → Mako-kun

Ryuushi-san → Niwa-kun

Maekawa-san → Transfer student

Erio → Cousin

Hmmm, it felt like how the further a rumor spreads, the more ridiculous it becomes. If the order could at least be reversed… Yep. Just as scary.

Tamura Obaa-san put on her reading glasses — more precisely, on her nose to have clearest image — and looked up to Ryuushi-san. As if understanding something, Tamura Obaa-san hid her chin back into the sheets with an 'ah, ah~' after seeing a coy Ryuushi-san:

“You're the kid who isn't one of Erio's friends, now I remember.”

“Ah~ Ugh, yes! Touwa-san and I went to different elementary school.”

Ryuushi-san shot Erio a glance after finishing; Erio lightly nodded concurringly. Um, the air between these two seemed a bit estranged. From Ryuushi-san, I could tell that she didn't want to be acknowledged as Erio's friend.

“What, you are not friends?”

Sensing the atmosphere, Tamura-san bluntly crossed the line. Even though she looked like a defense-oriented shell, her offense did not have second thoughts. Tortoise shell combined with experience of age make the perfect team~ I absentmindedly enjoyed this misguided reverence.[45] As for me, shutting up would be the wisest thing.

The wall existing between these two was likely related to Erio’s expulsion from school. And if that’s true, for an outsider, it’s a bit, you know, for me to interrupt.

“Ugh… No… We~ Are~ Friends…?”

Ryuushi-san’s ambivalent smile jovially slanted with the words that failed to combine, seemingly about to sink. Erio, too, was unsure and restless about the noun ‘friend.’ She requested helped from me with her eyes. What do you want me to do? I haven’t even decided if I should categorize you as a friend or whatever. The enigma of being relatives truly boggles me.

“Seriously, there is too many signals here!” Tamura Obaa-san complaint about the mist above:

“Listen well, I am changing the topic completely, so let the air breath!”

“M-mm.” “O-oh!” One of them nodded; the other raised her right fist.

“Cough!” Tamura Obaa-san cleared her throat convincingly, squeezing out a wrinkled yet gleeful voice. Looking at her like that, I thought it looked like a person who desperately sucked on an old bottle with few drops of sweet fluid inside.

“Your father should be called Naoya, right? Is he doing okay?”

“Mm, he’s great! Dad just went mountain climbing last Sunday!”

Ryuushi-san replied Tamura Obaa-san’s tone with her own cheery attitude. But I can’t deny that there was acting involved.

“How nostalgic! When he was in second grade, he ran into the store crying about UFO’s.”

Eheeheehee, a reminiscent smile climbed onto Tamura Obaa-san’s face. “Oh…” The momentum from earlier disappeared; Ryuushi-san subtly took those words. Of course, since it didn’t sound like her father’s heroic history, but something in the listing of a braggart.

"And then? And then?" Even though it was none of her business, Erio still pounced at the word 'UFO.' Compared to not having a hint of acting, her attitude was more like she had completely forgotten about the previous conversation. I might have almost forgotten, but Erio is *that* Meme-san's daughter. Things like getting or giving information according to her personal needs might just be as natural as breathing.

"In the end someone found out that it was a lie, and he tasted his friends' punishment. Of course: UFO aren't that easy to find! Those bastards are extremely cautious!"

Like introducing a friend, Tamura Obaa-san described the secrecy of UFO's.

"Yeah. You can't even see them with binoculars."

Erio complied. Normally, this shouldn't be a topic discussed with a serious face!

Forced to listen to her father's shameful history, Ryuushi-san lowered her head; to how easily this topic floated, she could only give a bitter courtesy smile.

"Is it raining outside?" Tamura Obaa-san calmly listened and mumbled: "Lately, I've been not wanting to see the weather change." Then she spoke equivocal words that seemed like a complaint or else, eyes stared boringly at the ceiling.

The time of silence continued; Ryuushi-san and Erio awkwardly traded their glances. Looked like they both saw each other as aliens, investigating the other's ecology.

And I stood about a step away from them, conducting my observation on the two.

"Hm? What, again?" Tamura Obaa-san's mind returned ground from the weather as she asked bluntly.

Noticing our different positions – I don't know how she saw it – she spoke:

"Listen, don't you be thinking about all that stuff. I don't want full-colours; no romantic comedy! If you're doing that, go somewhere else!"

Shoo~! She seemed to drive us away with loathe from the bottom of her heart.

"This isn't a romantic comedy! Ryuuko-san only does serious things!" Someone else hopped.

And thus we made it through the tension.

In general, I would never get into a pot full of so many Youth-points.

My daily life was basically white and black; vivid people occasionally appear in the frame and leave their faintly-coloured footprints. I will carefully save those fragments and name them 'Youth-points.'

…Whatever, it was just something I decided under my own discretion.

Part 2.

For a while after that, it was just Tamura Obaa-san talking and Ryuushi-san listening. Perhaps that's how Tamura Obaa-san shows kindness, but she's usually so talkative that I didn't think it was any different.

When Ryuushi-san's about to head home, I followed her toward the entrance; Erio sat still without moving. Ryuushi-san, too, when she held onto the pull door, gaping as if giving up the chance to talk with Erio. She left never saying a word to the back that curled up.

I forced the hard-to-move slide door – which became even more so in the humidity – and went outside. The small rain grew into a medium rain (pronounced naka-same). Rain obstructed the sight of the wall across the street; splatter on the roof were more like the cacophony of rooftop construction rather than the splash of rain.[46]

"Did you ride here, Ryuushi-san?"

Standing next to me, Ryuushi-san, who stood next to me, nodded slightly melancholically:

"Mm, yep. But my bike is a bit further away from here."

Huh? Strange, she didn't add 'I told ya I'm Ryuuko~'! For someone who's grown addicted to that 'I told ya~' I am tempted by the dissatisfaction to run around Ryuushi-san and tell her 'hey! You~ Are Ryuu~Shi!' Just kidding.

Indifferent to my feeling, Ryuushi-san spoke while playing with her umbrella grip:

"Touwa-san~ She's a lot mellower now!"

The expression was just like using popcorn as filling for your teeth. You need to go talk to an orthopsychologist to get a proper filling… I almost blurted out, but stopped because it made no sense. **NO** denpa.[47]

“Hm? Mm, I guess. Pessimistic, maybe?” Or shy? In reference to the futon.

“She used ta be really mean and would never stop talking!”

“Really?” Verbally abusive I get, but I can’t picture her not shutting up. At most I could trace an expressionless Erio twirling her tongue.

If she hid in the shadow of the house of Tamura Obaa-san, she’d be a new breed of Youkai.

“Niwa-kun.”

As if wanting to cut something between us, Ryuushi-san exaggeratingly waved her umbrella, showing a serious attitude.

She straightened her back and stared at me with no embarrassment. I did feel a little tingle on my face though.

With rain scattering in the background, a face to face with a girl — the scenery stirred the remnant of Youth-points like leaves in the wind. Yet the result of those fragments combining seemed unlikely this time.

“Saying stuff like this… Mm, even I think it’s too mean…”

Ryuushi-san twirled her hair with a finger; instead of waiting for the punchline, it’s more like she found it hard to spoke. “What is?” Under my nudging, she fearfully opened her mouth like dragging a numb foot. She even looked to the store midway through:

“Touwa-san is~ She’s notorious, especially in our school.”

“Mm.” I was neither involved nor familiar, so it didn’t seem real to me. But I nodded.

“So, if anyone knew I’m friends with her, people might shout ‘Hold it there!’ at me.” Saying so, Ryuushi-san suddenly reached out and slashed the umbrella at my side: “That might happen~ So Ryuuko-san is kinda worried about your future.”

“Mm, I see.” Meaning I won’t have any friends?

Indeed, the chance of something like that happening in a school is more than likely. After all, there is nothing else more controlling than ‘group mentality.’ If someone — especially a girl who’s the core of the class — who hates Erio appeared, the wave to ostracize me would spread like a virus.

Ryuushi-san awkwardly stared at her swinging feet, as if kicking some imaginary pebbles:

“I came here with my friend Mikki yesterday.”

“You’re friends with M*ckey?”

That’s quite a thing to say, Ryuushi-san. No, should I call you Ricky? Sounds like a rip-off![48]

“Ah, Mikki’s my friend in club!” In other words, that person approached wearing the costume and asked ‘do you like basketball?’ …Ok, enough of the same joke. By the way, that whole manga was purchased one by one when I went shopping with Ryuushi-san in the bookstore. Currently I don’t plan on buying the whole set.[49]

“Watcha call it. Mikki doesn't wanna come here anymore because of Erio. So I thought, 'ah~ so that's what everybody thought~' For me, it's a bit complicated with Touwa-san in many ways, y'know~ But, like, is it normal to think like that at school?”

“...I guess.” Mikki-san's reaction was probably correct.

Covering for Erio isn't easy. Personal complication isn't an amnesty — rather than involving personal issues, might as well just make something up. It'll be better to just tell a story.

But between the two choices, the mere difference is 'the lowest of lowest' and 'the highest of lowest.' Whatever the case is, Erio would be the latter. She did, after all, bothered everybody at school with her incomprehensible fits.

Hence for Erio, it doesn't matter whether it's not being hired or scaring others with her antics, everything was reasonable — it was her own making. Not even herself could deny it.

Life cannot be reset. No matter the age, it is impossible once shouldered with a lethal burden.

But it is still unclear whether Erio's past was the fatal wound for her.

“Um, y'know~” Ryuushi-san tugged on my shirt; my conscious was also pulled back.

“Hm?” When I realized, Ryuushi-san was unexpectedly close to me, sending me to a daze.

“Niwa-kun, do you… hate me now? Am I despicable?”

She looked like and spoke with a slightly fawning voice… That's what I thought. But since I haven't received the certification of Ryuushi-san identifier, I couldn't tell the minor differences.

“Why?”

“Uh, cuz, I just am! Like, I've been trying all this time to make ya think I'm a good kid. So, y'know...” She muttered.

Ahh… Really? Hm, is that how it is? I get it, but I don't really think it's a problem.

“Not wanting to be friends with weirdos, and not wanting to be alone.

These are all normal.”

“I-i-it's not normal! Ryuushi-san I have a thorny reputation because of my personality! Ya might get stabbed by me!”

“No, that's not what I mean!”

“I know~ Geez, I just can't stand sudden **serious** topics. I'm not very good with things like silica-gel. Mm.”[50] Usually no one is. Also, *you* are responsible for being serious? Or rather, there wasn't anyone like that around me anyway.

Like there's wouldn't be a doctor on an airplane. Not that I really know.

“Embarrassed~ Embarrassed~” After taking in a serious breath, Ryuushi-san seemed redden.

The background rain poured on. Since I looked away, Ryuushi-san also turned back, letting the air of 'ah, then see ya later' slip in.

Ryuushi-san raised her umbrella toward the sky; the melody that played when droplets hit it circled in my eardrums:

“Thanks for your advice. I'll think about how to deal with Erio.”

“Eh. Ya wanna think — ah, but… I see, so that's what I meant. Wuu… Nnngg~ Ahhhhhh!” Ryuushi-san began struggling. She held her head and put the umbrella down; rain trickled down the inside of her neck. “Uh, Ryuushi-san? Do I need to throw you another towel?”

“Wuahhhhhh!”

She yelled abruptly and straight-up sprinted. She swung her arms dramatically; the umbrella were meaningless, or rather, an obstruction! She ran forward without balance, probably because of the umbrella's air resistance.

“I hate my weakness~! I know it~!”

Ryuushi-san kept screaming about something while sprinting in the rain. Even though she rides slow, she's pretty fast running. Running in the rain without the protection of an umbrella — could she be looking for Youth-points…? Not that it looked like that for me. I scratched the back of my head.

“Erio, huh…?” A mysterious name that sounded like the keyword.

Erio already left school.

Yet, the influence of Touwa Erio lingered.

It's unfair. My mouth moved for no reason.

"So why am I still here, after listening to all that..."

I was confused with why I returned next to Tamura Obaa-san's bed in her room without thinking. I even prepared a cushion, sitting on there with my hands holding my cheeks. Was I too relaxed?

"Your tea is not bad. At least better than Erio's."

Sitting down and drinking with an old lady; I felt like I'm playing substitute grandpa.

We let the hot tea touch our tongues, sitting away from each others from a distance. Tamura Obaa-san trembled, but remained seated on the sheets; though the cup and the water within shook, she still enjoyed the tea.

Every time I head into the kitchen to make tea, my heart sinks.

There was only a blurred window with some cobwebs on the corner. Plus it was raining today, a darkness different from the night's filled the kitchen.

As if carpeted by coal ash, the room did not feel alive, like nobody has used it. Whether the diminutive stove worked was suspicious; the plates stacked on the shelf felt like they couldn't hold anything. A plate for kids with bunny pattern was placed on the top, giving off an intense sorrow for some reason. Is it because I thought the plate held an important past for Tamura Obaa-san?

"A while ago I had Erio make some tea. The idiot almost burned herself."

I grumbled with a voice bitterer than the tea.

"Just how much did Meme spoil her daughter?"

"How would I know? She suddenly rolled out with the futon. Is she throwing a tantrum?"

It was an objective analysis. Obaa-san could actually understand the emotion of Erio, the recluse. Sigh, it's actually not hard to. Nobody in high spirits would ever hide in a futon, right?

"And then?"

"Hah?" I raised my head only after covering the cup.

"You are worried about something else, right?"

Tamura Obaa-san kept her left eye shut, turning only the right on me. Fortunately, it didn't look like she was winking.

“Can you manipulate people's heart when you're old?” I questioned first.

“Anyone could listening to you mumbling about things like 'why am I still…' Dimwit.”

Obaa-san arbitrarily censured me, in a way almost like spitting. And then, she looked to the ceiling wearily: “The rain has become louder.” Is she worried about a leak?

“May I talk this over with you?”

“If I'm only listening, then I will listen. As of whether it's worth talking over, it is not my business.”

Her attitude was pulling with one hand while pushing with another. Using modern terms to translate the unique quirk of old people, it'll probably be tsundere. How intriguing, I thought.

“If I don't listen to people talk occasionally, eventually no one would listen to me. This is what my stupid husband told me, but I basically follow it.”

Seemed like the target of Tamura Obaa-san's dere wasn't me, but her deceased husband. Good.

Actually, I kind of thought about whether it should be discussed with someone else. But after keeping my voice down in case anybody can hear it in the hallway, I began.

“It's actually about Erio, there's a bit...” More correctly, there a problem with yours truly who's always around her.

“Only 'a bit' when talking about her. Impressive of you.” As you've said.

“Ryuush… *Ryuuko-san* from earlier said that Erio is considered as a freak in town. To be frank, people hate her.”

“Oh? And then?” Tamura Obaa-san urged me to continue, somewhat disinterested.

“Because I'm Erio's cousin, we're pretty close. But if rumors spread in school, I'll be shunned. That's the advice I got.”

“Hm, one moment, let me drink my tea.”

Upon finishing, Tamura Obaa-san held up the tea quiveringly. With the sound of sipping noodles, she let the fluid rolled into her throat. Following her, I smoothed my mouth with some tea.

“Now, proceed.” Cough, Tamura Obaa-san lightly breathed out.

“So, I'm wondering about what I should do.” I personally think that it should be 'worrying.'

In truth, isolation at school is deadly to a student. There won't be any way to enjoy things like Youth-points; mental stress adds up continuously, and could potentially cause permanent damage.

Of course, such unseen harassment exists in my school.

I don't want be there. I honestly thought.

Only, was my brain thinking about that specifically? It was dubious. It seemed that I've mindlessly accepted the current situation, unreasonably and wishfully thinking that it will continue forever.

The apprehension for such thoughts hid in my heart. Did I want to do nothing, without letting go of anything?

“Hm… I see, I see.” Tamura Obaa-san glancingly replied and nodded slowly.

“...” Sips.

“...” Sips.

“You'd only drown us both if you want me to help you. Don't think I can ever pull you out.”

You murderer of the old lady! I was reprimanded as if I've already committed the crime.

“'What should I do' is just searching for possibilities. People can only step on the ground of reality once they start worrying about what they *will* do. The so-called advices are things that you seek after that. Who would offer help for things in a person's head?”

She criticized me, the water in her cup shook. Faced with Tamura Obaa-san, I bluffed as well:

“Well, I've planned on deciding on my own since the start.”

“Good. Even an idiot can think of something after contemplating.”

At that point, Tamura-san spat out some tea leaves as if she thought of something:

“Excluding gains and losses, an idiot's thought is basically correct. Idiots are simple, after all.”

This time, her cheeks and wrinkles relaxed elegantly, carrying a reminiscent kindness.

Was that an advice? Though the point is to think on my own, after talking with someone else, something deep down felt surprisingly easy. Like shoving extra luggage to someone else, it became lighter.

Then, let's think. Picture it: if Erio and I severed all relation.

Even if Erio called me with a staccato of 'Cousin~' 'Cousin?' while approaching me, who never turned back, I could completely ignore her… Nope, probably not. It's already impossible, huh?

“If there is one thing I could clarify, it'd be… People can live without friends.”

Perhaps unable to stand even temporary silence, Tamura Obaa-san spoke on.

In the end, she still agreed to give me something like an advice. People who like to talk can never keep quiet.

I guess it's because she's a dishonest yet caring person? Must have been popular seventy years ago.

“Friends are neither oxygen nor water. If anything, they are a luxury: if they exist, people will naturally feel fulfilled, and if they don't, they'll find a way to make due. It isn't any different than coffee or tobacco, the existence of other people. Let's say a smoker: it's normal for him to not have smoke on him as well. There is no need to feel ashamed to have no friends; if you feel arrogant having many friends, then you're just simple-minded fool, since that's synonymous to admitting that you're addicted. Sigh, it's good to be confident in your communication skills, but that's no different than being able to hold your liquor.”

Getting here with one breath, Tamura Obaa-san took a breath. Her shoulders slouched weakly, beginning the oxygenation of her lungs.

“In other words, don't be afraid of your friends now, or friends who might become your enemies in the future.”

“...” Hearing the word 'friends,' the first thing I thought was Ryuushi-san.

Even for her, would she point at me when everyone around has become the enemy? Were the frivolous things we said the first time we met at the parking lot all a big joke in the end?

“If you're scared of loneliness, don't live for too long. Just look at me: friends or husbands, they're all dead. Aren't I the last person around?”

Those words were a complaint spoken with a cheerful determination — an oxymoron.

“I'm almost there myself. Lately, I think about how I'm the next every night. That's why I say the aliens will perform **cattle mutilation** on me.” Eheeheehee, Tamura Obaa-san concluded with her befitting laughter.

“Worry about it slowly! Worries are a thing that could be solved in a day! Rest well for the next 364 days.”

Tamura Obaa-san added one more thing, put the cup next to her pillows and tremblingly lied back on the futon.

Without the sheet, her back looked lonely — emaciated and without energy.

“To think, and worry...” I looked up at the ceiling. The wood looked darker perhaps because of the seepage; drops of water seemed like they'd fall anytime. I stuck on tongue out, waiting for the drip that never came. I simply gawked stupidly.

My relation with Erio will affect that with other people.

For example, uhh… Ryuushi-san would one of them.

So what should I do?

Ignore the idiot rolling around in the hallway behind the slide door who emitted an air of 'give me attention~'

I can ignore the futon roll, but not Erio. This could be the key.

I stuck my tongue into the cup and touched the green surface.

The tea was lukewarm — the perfect temperature.

With one motion, I swallowed the entire cup of tea, enjoying the sensation of water swaying in my stomach.

☆

“Can I go to transfer student's house today?”

When I was sitting the school cafeteria eating a pork bowl, someone whispered in my ears: “I want to see your room...”

Of course it was a dramatic replay, but the conclusion was the same, right?

The event occurred on June 25th, Friday noon.

Maekawa-san, who sat opposite of me, requested after finishing talking about the flavour of pork bowl.

Gravity claimed the skin off the pork I held in chopsticks; only the meat stayed.

“Eh… Um, it's not my house...”

The sudden proposal shocked me into refuting an irrelevant detail.

“Oh, right, it's Touwa's house. So, can I?”

The 'can I' part somehow carried a hypnotizing charm. My ears are done, oh no!

“M-my parents won't be home today!”

“It's not like you live together anyway, I recall.”

“That's right.” That made no sense.

Maekawa-san picked up the pickled radish with her chopsticks, raising it to the light and spoke:

“Relax! I'll go home too; I won't eat you!”

Such adult declaration made my heart overly sensitive to the Maekawa-san who had on a teasing smirk. My head hurt:

“I-is that so? To my house, huh?”

“Transfer student, you're not picking anything up. Your chopsticks are missing!”

“I've lost depth perception because I looked down on blue berries. Now my eyes are rebelling.”[51]

Inviting a girl to my room. More specifically, a girl visiting. But it's worth three-points. I've gotten five-points, and considering four-points' are only in certain occasions, then isn't now the chance for the highest possible point in daily life? I made up these wordy definitions because I've actually nervous. Inviting a girl to my room — the last time I did it was in sixth grade.

“But why?”

“Pure interest. I just want to see what kind of room the transfer student lives in.”

And I have the day off — she added boredom as part of her motivations and bit down on the radish.

Having a… Tour? In my house with Maekawa-san after school. Not that I will find anything new, but oh well. Let my heart beat to a point where I can't focus in the afternoon lessons!

I tried to calmly grasp my excitement, almost vomiting:

“Having said that...”

“Hm?”

“Maekawa-san, do you have friends?”

Was the question surprising to her? Maekawa-san's eyes repeated performed a blinking action.

“*You* are my friend.”

“Hm.” Touche, I thought.

With a pause, I asked another question:

“One more thing.”

“Hm.”

“What do you think of Erio?”

Hearing my query, Maekawa-san's no-so-big-eyes squinted even more.

Did I say something wrong? But since Maekawa-san already knew about me and Erio, it shouldn't be an issue.

Besides, this isn't a classroom; our chatter will be swallowed by the messy air before entering others' ears.

“Looking at Touwa, I couldn't help but think of one thing.” Maekawa-san spoke looking at the bowl.

“Which is?”

“If everyone belongs somewhere, where does Touwa belong?”

Maekawa-san stated solemnly while picking up the remaining rice with her chopsticks.

A place where Erio belongs.

In the futon… Not funny.

After picking out all the rice, Maekawa-san added:

“In any case, I think...”

“Hm.”

“The cafeteria lady needs to give up on the pork bowl and think about making a proper Oyakodon instead.”[52]

You're completely right. I fully agreed, shoving the onions in my mouth.

☆

“Alright, lets go!”

Maekawa-san dragged her bag and came to my seat as soon as school was out.

The model-like classmate who usually leave class after school's out actually walked to the window opposite to the door in a straight line. Her advance toward the transfer student's seat stole many eyes from the room.

Ryuushi-san, who melted into a crowd, was no exception. She jaunted toward us:

“Niwa-kun, where are ya goin'?”

She wore an extra bag aside from her school bag, slightly displeased to ask about my schedule today. I recently noticed that on the days when she carries that bag, she goes to club.

“I'm going to transfer student's house!”

“Wha...”

Hearing the destination, Ryuushi-san had a strange reaction. It was neither anger, nor envy.

Though the reply had a sound, it seemed lost as if a person wondering where to go.

I immediately realized where that expression came from.

Because my house equals to Erio's house. She's still worried about what happened six days ago.

“And we're gonna do all sorts of things.”

“Whuoa!”

But Maekawa-san's next line seemed to break her out of contemplation.

Rip the chains, be completely surprised, and charge forward… Oh.

“All sorts! Of things! Things… Sorts of things… Wu~!”

As if picturing something, Ryuushi-san eyed Maekawa-san from the feet up and began bouncing.

“Don't you think Ryuushi is surprisingly misinformed about things between guys and girls?”

Maekawa-san, with a big grin, asked bluntly for my assent. If I held her up by the collar it'd a simple harassment, so I only glared at her:

“Why do you only speak in confusing ways (語弊)?”

“How about dressing up like a gohei-mochi (五平餅) and speak in confusing ways (語弊)?”[53]

“Did I ask you to hold a conference for costume-and-lame-jokes?”

“But won't it be boring just glaring at each others in a room? So I categorized possible activities like video games and Reversi into 'all sorts of things.'

“So you knew?”

“Hehehe, I told ya if you're ever in trouble, just find Maekawa.”

Did she really understand what she meant?

“Hey~!” Ryuushi-san tossed out the bag on her hand; the object flew through the opening between students, beautifully landing on the podium.

For some reason, she spun twice before smiling at me.

“Actually, Ryuushi-san doesn't have club today!”

“……”

I traded looks with Maekawa-san. I looked up, and she looked down.

“I don't really mind?” Her expression was both expectant and calm:

“My goal is to become the best support! Hm, this time.”

It's kind of rude to say this when she's so absorbed, but that's just some meaningless excuse to me.

Oh well, whatever!

It's settled.

Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san will visit the Touwa residence.

Hold on, part two.

五章『コスプレ72　前川さんと働きぶり』

<丹羽 真>

●リュウシさんとぎくしゃく。	−2
●エリオとの関係に悩む。	−2
●前川さんとリュウシさんが藤和家に遊びに来ることになる。	+2
現在の青春ポイント合計	−11

<藤和エリオ>

●接客頑張った。	+2
現在の社会復帰ポイント合計	−48

<藤和女々>

●変動イベントとくに無し。	
現在の幸福ポイント合計	+3

Chapter 5 - Cosplay Seventy-two — Maekawa-san and Work Status

May 20th. A cola-giving stalker appeared before me.

…Well, since I haven't discover his true identity or grasp a complete understanding of the entire business, it might be too early to make the conclusion. Uhh, let's focus on the direction of 'thinking' first.

In the Wagashi shop I work at, I discovered Poc*ri bottles filled with cola left by someone in the backdoor when I was throwing the trash out. There were five bottles. 'It isn't poisoned, just normal cola. I can't drink soda, please take it.' The memo with retro handwriting stuck under the bottles claimed so. It didn't say if this was a present for xxx, or 'I'm your fan, please keep up the cosplaying' — things that could explain the source.

"…"

If we were to let the thing known as 'the view of an educator' function, I seem to need to find out the admirable things first. Isn't the attitude of not dumping unfinished food into the sink important? I think so at least. Then don't buy or take it. It's kind of worth complaining, but what should I do?

The environment around hadn't desertify to a point where I'd chug one of these bottles of suspicious fluid.

Although I thought about using them as bowling pins, I probably shouldn't play around too much during work time. Since keeping these outside would probably attract more attention, I decided to bring the bottles inside. It's heavy — like a third of Maekawa-san. Who the hell could lift all this crap?! Complaining as I did, I still completed the onerous process without falling over. "Ah, shoot." After shuffling the bottles, lining and cleaning them, I realized. Mindlessly shaking bottles filled with carbonated drinks might not have been too bright.

"What are those?"

Komaki-san, the substitute manager, asked about the items I brought in while slowly stirring the pot's content with a wooden scoop. She's probably making some uiro-mochi.[54]

I reported after sitting down on the chair with red-bean coloured covering:

“It was left outside with a note.”

Komaki-san is a beauty older than me; she is also the substitute manager who works harder than our actual manager. Out of the people I know, she's considered the serious type. Though the part of her that's too confident is worth noting as well. The primary source of income from the Wagashi shop I work at comes from purchasing and reselling food made else where. But Komaki-san makes her own snack in the shop. She doesn't make too much, but she still puts them in the display case for sell. Customers aren't scarce, but I think the manager wouldn't really blame us for not selling anything. Perhaps because it's been running since long ago, this shop has a very deep bond with the locals; the majority of our income has always been regulars. Red and white manju for gifting or celebration, or funeral manju: we've a hand in all of them. I've only learned recently that even if we don't perform well, this shop won't just go broke. To be honest, I've been coming to observe the store since long ago. I've never seen people go in, so I've always thought it was unbelievable.

“What about the drinks?” Komaki-san looked back to the pot and spoke indifferently.

“Hand them to the police?”

“No, it's fine. Leave them in the fridge, I'll have them later.”

Her index finger pointed firmly at the refrigerator.

“Eh? You're gonna drink them? This stuff?”

“Well, we already took them in.”

“We don't even know where it's from though!”

Even though I spoke so, the perpetrator candidate still appeared in my head. 'Maybe…'

Someone's been shooting bottle rockets lately. Making one of those requires roughly five plastic bottles; it's surprisingly difficult to prepare one of those. For example, in the arts and craft class in elementary school, we'd go collect bottles before recycle day to avoid the trouble of collecting.

“It's fine. It's not going to kill me.”

Rather than with the cola, she appeared more absorbed with making pastries — even the way she spoke seem to be unconcerned.

“When the mix thickens… Mm.” Komaki-san cross-checked the book on the side with the content in the pot, and then stopped scoop's motion. Looks like she's about to proceed onto the next stage. As for me, it was about time to go back to work.

“So...”

“Yes?”

Komaki-san once again turned around. Chewing while staring at my stark-white body, she asked. The hint of doubt appeared around between her brows:

“What is that?”

“My goal is to become the store's mascot.”

Ah, forgot to mention, but my current outfit was a cosplay of a white dango.

“Hmng.” With a hand back on her chin, Komaki-san asked with a tilted head: “What's your name?”

“People call me Maekawa.”

“I see. Then, Maekawa, go clean the front.”

“With this thing on?”

“With that thing on.”

“Aye, aye sir!”

I picked up the broom and dustpan, and wobbled my way out of the kitchen.

“Eh, is she serious?” Though mumbling seemed to come behind me, I paid it no mind.

I decided to go check out the scene after school tomorrow if I see a rocket flying tomorrow.

Why shoot rockets in the afternoons of weekdays? I'm somewhat interested too.

☆

I usually eat lunch at the school cafeteria. Because if I ask for bento from my parents, it'd basically be the leftover from the store. My parents run a bar, as for what reason I don't know.

We eat the leftover for breakfast too. Plus when I help out in the pub, I have dinner there as well. Hence, it became possible for me to have the same thing for all three meals; therefore, I decided to have lunch at the school cafeteria. Also, for some reason, the transfer student sat across from me today.

“The oyakodon here is pretty good!”

Scooping up the oyakodon I recommended with a spoon, he happily described his thoughts. His right hand was still wrapped in cast. Unfortunately, he broke his arm last month.

“It's a bit too sweet though.”

“Really?” Hearing me, transfer student quizzically tilted his head. It would appear the transfer student likes food with a lot of flavor.

Not that it will ever be useful, I still took a mental note:

“What's the matter, transfer student? How come you're not eating with Ryuushi today?”

“I thought that I should try the school food sometimes. Also, I don't eat with her all the time. The girls in basket ball are having lunch together today too.”

Pouring the egg-and-rice into his mouth, he spoke quickly as if defending himself. He doesn't have be concerned for me — shouldn't he worry about Ryuushi instead?

Ryuushi seems to call him by last name… Uh… Miwa...san? Probably, I think.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Hm?” Spoon in his mouth, transfer student looked up to me. Oh, that's kinda cute!

Should I bring the transfer student along to the rocket site today?

The opponent will be, after all, a stranger suspected of being a stalker.

If the person is a burly man like one of those astronauts, would I become a substitute javelin, or be stuffed into a tube and squeezed out like at a performance for a banquet? I'm pretty scared, especially of the latter one, The fragile Maekawa-san (sounds like a joke just looking at my appearance, but an unfunny truth once you know) needs a reliable guy to protect her… But looking closely, the transfer student can't use his dominant hand. I don't want to lose sleep knowing that his injury got worse because I brought him to places. Hm~ but I don't know any other guys.

“Never mind, just forget it.”

“Hrm?” He replied with the spoon still in his mouth.

We departed without ever mentioning the after school plan.

“See ya, Miwa-kun.”

I called his last name when we parted. Before I got a response, though, he gave me a weird look with a twitch.

For just a second, he had a 'who the hell's that?' look when your name has been mixed with someone else's, or like 'what a shame!' kind of disappointed look. Maybe he's actually not Miwa-kun?

Either way, I don't think that suited me. I decided to still call him transfer student next time I see him.

My favourite food is the banana Swiss roll. Next time someone asks me that, I'm going to answer that.

“I love this~” Honestly, it's so good — so good that I regretted neglecting it every time I pass it in the super market.

After school on the 21st, I received one of these from my boss, Komaki-san. After casually eating it, I gladly complimented. Komaki-san lightly smiled after hearing me, and spoke with her chopsticks moving:

“Awesome.”

Today Komaki-san baked two pieces of pancakes for herself. She called them the replacement for lunch. Since there weren't knives or forks here, she cut the pancakes with disposable chopsticks. She was even drinking the cola from yesterday. Up until now, Komaki-san showed no signs of change: the only thing that bubbled was the cola.

“Now I wanna go work at a bread factory.”

“I won't say no.”

“Starting tomorrow, I will wear a banana costume.”

“Give up on that or give up your job.”

With warm exchange like such, I passed my meaningful time off school.

“Don't you have the day off today?”

“I do! But I came for some tea.”

“Then why are you eating in the store front?”

“'Cuz this is the best spot!” I won't be able to see the rockets inside the kitchen.

From the entrance of the store I could see the rocket flying through the sky clearly. Even though it's more than a hundred times smaller than the scale of a rocket shown on a TV screen, the projectile piqued my interest during work more than the birds or planes. I had pretty much pinpointed the location.

The place is the abandoned farm school not far away from here. The campus closed down around the time I became a middle-school third grade, so about two years ago? Hmm, I miss the fifteen-year old Maekawa-san… Setting that aside for now, I finished the banana Swiss roll. A bit got on my hand, so I licked the butter off when Komaki-san wasn't looking. Neither of us was eating food related to Wagashi! Now then, what was I saying? Oh, rockets. The topic almost went to space since the beginning.

'Bottle rockets should only be used in the field or an open space!' Grade school teachers once taught me that. But they've never told me to keep the room bright and keep a distance from it. Duh. I've learned that you can't see well if it's not bright enough, and people beside the one responsible for launching the rocket have to be away. It's just common knowledge.

In simple terms, what I'm trying to say is that the only place open enough that's not too far away from here would be the abandoned school. If the rocketeer is someone with common sense, then he must follow that rule.

If not, then it should have already been a big problem.

“Ah, a rocket!” Hearing Komaki-san's words, I lifted my chin. Above the house in front of the store, the rocket grew. It appeared suddenly and soared through the air.

“Why do they launch that?”

After catching wind of my mumble, Komaki-san paused the hands that were busily glazing the pancakes with maple syrup and gave an answer. Her eyes focused onto the bottle rocket:

“Maybe their target is space?”

“Even though it's water-powered?”

“I think the goal of anything going upward is space.”

“Really?” For some reason I imagined myself jumping in front of a mirror.

“To completely leave gravity, and fly out with a boom. But space isn't exactly friendly to live, so it's just make-believe in the end. Does this mean to emulate the real deal isn't any easier?”

With a mature sigh, Komaki-san sent a piece of pancake into her mouth.

Had there been a past event that made her resent gravity? However, I have no way of knowing that, since it's got nothing to do with what's happening, and I've no reason to ask.

Is it about time to go? It would be inconvenient if the rocketeer left.

“I'm going now. See ya.”

“Good bye~”

Waving the chopsticks in place of her hand, Komaki-san drank the cola again.

I thought to myself as I left… I hope Komaki-san doesn't get a stomachache and not show up tomorrow. The concern for a possible increase in work ached dully.

I parked my bike outside of the high school; without caution whatsoever, I went in through the gate.

From the surrounding greenhouse and field that been completely neglected, the remnant of the agriculture school reverberated. Since no one came to clean up, plastic bag for bread that was probably blown in from the outside pushed against leaves covered in dirt. About a year ago, people of the shopping district were concerned with hobos living here. Maybe someone still lives here?

Animal husbandry is an education too, I realized as I headed toward the field.

There was, naturally, a cow in the barn. It mooed, eating some grain. Was it abandoned here? Or maybe someone is feeding it? It might even be the rocketeer's pet.

The cattle tag on its ear signified it's identity as a livestock. The cow's name was Hana-chan. A girl?

“Moo~” I called out to it since it stared at me. But that's all it did.

I backed away three steps away from the barn. It's still staring; three more steps. Still doing it. Two more. Ah, there she goes.

Looks like I've exited the cow's alert zone. I'll try wearing a cow costume in front of it next time. I wrote the future prank into my mental notebook.

Other things I saw on the way include a black dog lying on the window of the second floor classroom… I think it was a dog, probably. It seemed to be panting with its tongue out. Did it take over the class for itself? ...Ah, could it be 'that?'

There's been an increase in stray animals disappearance recently. Could it be that someone's been feeding them here? Or is there now a special residence in this abandoned school for stray animals? If it's the former, and the purpose is abusive… I'll check it out later to see if there's a crime scene. If they're just living here, then I don't care if it's some weirdo's hobby, I won't get involved. It didn't seem like a bad thing, after all.

Maybe he just didn't have anywhere else to keep them.

I hurried across the campus and the runway for horses, entering the wastefully large field. Obviously it was bigger than the one at my school. I even thought that maybe everyone at school should just come here instead.

The first rocketeer revealed before the nation seemed to insist that he no longer needed to hide, sitting in the middle of the field. A guy wearing a suit sat cross-legged —the sight was somehow both the sign of freedom and umemployment.

Holding a blue hose connected to the drinking fountain, he sprayed freely at the ground. Like a burst dam, water squirted out from the pinched tube.

Laid on the side was a plastic bottle that's presumably used before — he must be the launcher himself. I closed in onto the back that was slightly curled up. Despite me getting so close, the rocketeer never looked back. Perhaps because the water's stream drowned my footsteps. I got extremely close to him, then walked three big steps away. After hesitating for a sec, I spoke:

“Yo.”

I used a greeting learned during the April of first year when I was being kicked around like a ball in sports clubs.

“Whoa!” The rocketeer flew up like a rocket himself — a classic expression of surprise. He twisted to look back, the water from the hose wet the ground in a semi-circular pattern. He kept the posture, looking up at me with his neck turned in an uncomfortable way, then was shocked.

“You are...” He shut his mouth at this point. I didn't think he'd be so surprised, and for a second I worried 'maybe he doesn't even know me?' But his apparent attitude was very different from fear of strangers, so that's impossible.

Must be that kind of people: the kind that you'd occasionally see on a walk in front of where I work.

“It seems that you know me, but I don't know who you are.”

“Of course you wouldn't. Eh, you don't? Uh, but no, that should be correct.”

For some reason, he questioned himself twice in that statement. Um, have I met this person before? Anyway, his mien didn't come across as a dangerous person, being thin and short.

“I've got questions for you, so I came.”

“Ahh. What is it?”

“Was it you who left the cola at the store?”

“Mm, I did.”

He admitted frankly. Looking at the way he nodded, it didn't seem that he thought he did something either virtuous or malicious.

“Did you drink it?”

“No, it's sketchy.”

I answered bluntly. “Sketchy?” The rocketeer appeared shocked at my response, resting the hose on the ground. As if replacing it, he hugged the rocket into his chest and onto his laps.

“Didn't I leave a note there?”

“Thanks to that, it became even more so.”

“Really?” Perhaps fairly confident in his own writing, he questioned the negative response frankly.

“Well, things of questionable origin are kinda...”

“When I was still a kid, we'd eat anything that looks like food.”

“Those generous days are well past over.”

Again, with a pause this time, the rocketeer mumbled: “I see...” His voice sounded even more austere.

Hm, however, the shopping district still has that kind of atmosphere to it.

But it's kind of considered by the city folks as the obsolete and shunned part of the city. As for me, who lives in the city but works in the shopping district, the position is quite the special one. Not that I'm aware of it all the time.

Even in class we can find people who live in the old houses bullied in grade school.

But that has nothing to do with what's happening.

“Why me?”

“Because I'm your… Uh, yes, fan!”

The rocketeer attempted to rely on this eureka, on-the-spot answer to rationalize his action. Rubbing the bottle rocket lovingly, he exposed his loss of cool.

“...You're lying.” And you're even fishier now.

“No, I'm not kidding, seriously.” If seen from a certain angle, this might carry a certain connotation. Hm, indeed, however, when it comes to giving me something, besides personal attachment, I can't think of any other reasons. In that case, is he asking for prostitution? For the Maekawa-san who's inherited half the characteristics of the pure-hearted shopping district, if somebody ever asks me that, it'll be determined as sexual harassment!

The rocketeer spent an unusual amount of time eying me from the bottom to top, and smiled. It's better if you don't smile like that too often, so people might like you more. The thought drifted in my head, but I said nothing. Whether it's for his own good or not is currently irrelevant.

“You're not wearing a strange outfit today!”

“Now that's rude, calling me strange. I'm actually a serious cosplayer.”

“Oh, then my bad.” Confused, he apologized perfunctorily.

He's real sketchy, this guy~ Doesn't quite smell like a fan~ Or rather, he obviously wasn't one — this isn't how a Maekawa-san hobbyist speaks. Should I, therefore, relax? Or let this sense of danger further expand?

The reason of him giving me cola mystified again… Uh, hold on. Maybe it wasn't actually for me? Eliminating the suspicious possibility that he's my fan, the motives for gifting me also dissipates. There are also others working in the Wagashi shop… Maybe he's trying to shift focus or make an excuse by saying it's for me. Like, maybe the true target is Komaki-san or someone? Most likely.

I'm still unsure what the rocketeer thought of my astonished look; he raised the rocket in hand to his forehead:

“Did you see this rocket going upward?”

“Uh… Sure, yeah. So why the rockets?”

“Ah… Hm, it's just my interest. Since I can never launch a real rocket into space, I use this as a substitute to fly into the sky.” He rubbed the tip of the rocket.

“...Space, huh?” The word somehow soothes me in a conversation. This might be the sign of a critical condition.

“Space is great, right? The sea hides many secrets, so it is just as amazing.”

“Hm...” I exhaled to regain the posture of my excited stomach and face muscles.

He's born in this town, right? Now I understand, in every way possible. Here, plenty of weird cosmophiles exist. Like Touwa. But, there is rarely a bad person.

I feel that everyone holds some sort of dream for wonders and mysteries — parts like an innocent child — all while playing grown-up.

“You, uh, quite good with your hands, yes?” The rocketeer asked in a strangely fast speed.

“Hm… I guess. I've always gotten five for my crafting classes.”

But only one for P.E, and last place for marathon. 'Cuz of air resistance and stuff.

The rocketeer's face beamed. “Excellent.” He muttered the words and brought an abrupt request:

“Actually, I wish for you to help me make rockets.”

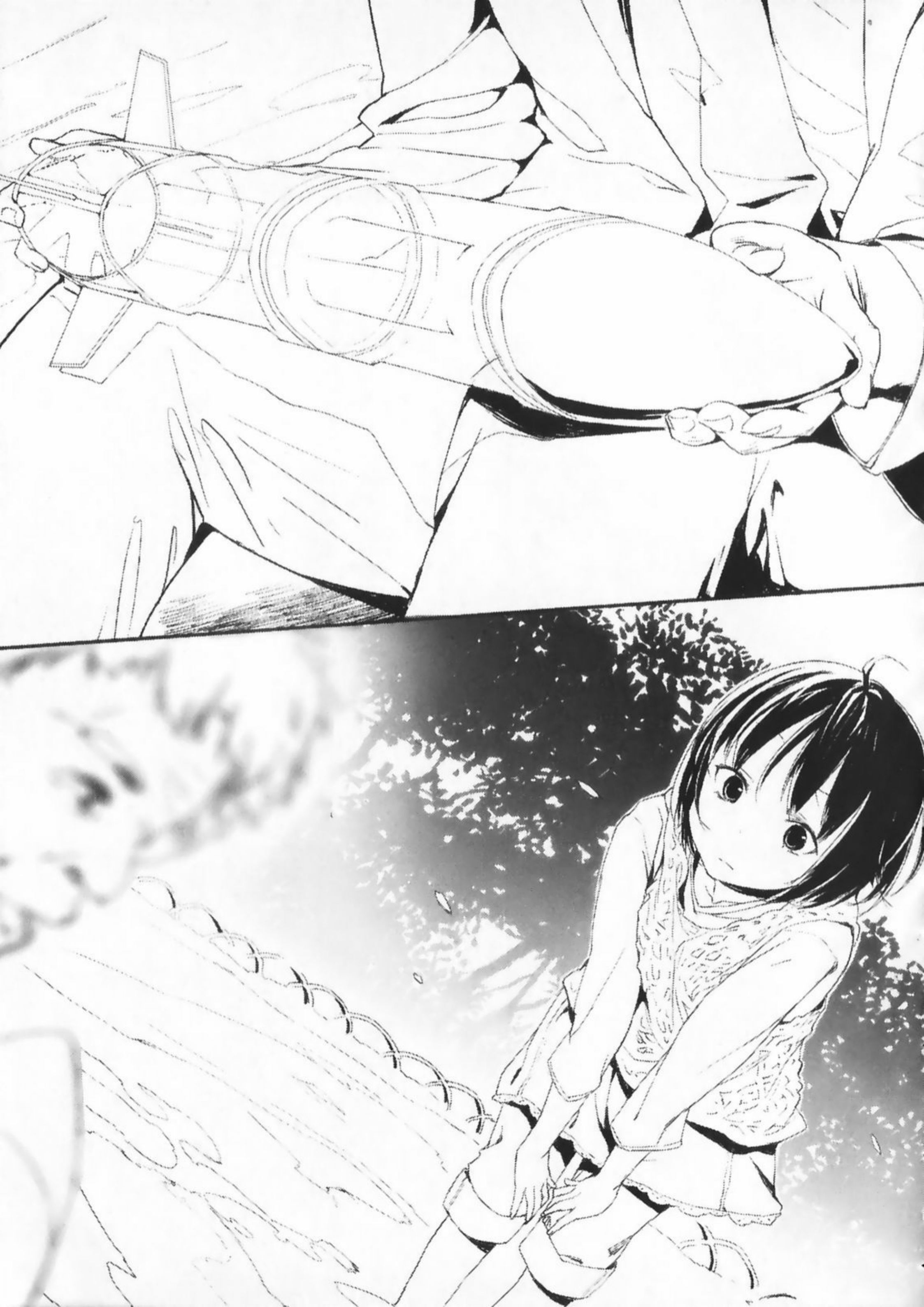
“Wha?”

“Have you made one before?”

“Yeah, during art class of elementary school.” Don't look down on modern kids, I can even sharpen a pencil using a knife!

During elementary school, I seemed to have sunk into the quagmire of repeatingly chiseling on pencils because I refused to use the sharpener like everyone else. Suddenly, it hit me as life — 'amendment is vital,' it was a divergence into the current personality of Maekawa-san. If I've never learned that, I might still be an overzealous person.

“Ah, I thought so too. It's been kept since our time!”



The weakness of nostalgia belonging to the guy's generation had been promptly hit; he smiled brilliantly. If I kept quite, I predicted that the cherry blossom of memory will bloom.

“But can't you make it yourself?” Instead of using my finger, I pointed with my eyes at the rocket on his knees.

“I can.” The rocketeer agreed, but stopped halfway and scratched the back of his head.

“Uh, it's, um, I'm busy both at work and private, so I can't dedicate all my time on my hobby.”

Yeah, just keep up the B.S. I almost said it outside. However, I had to keep silent.

Because after that, the rocketeer brought up the price of each rocket: it was enough to make my part time income seem like pocket change.

“I expect you to make more, but I also want you to bring each one as soon as it's complete, since I want to test-fly them.”

“Hm...” Hesitation was just an act, even I knew that.

As dubious as he was, he didn't seem like a bad person. More importantly was the attractiveness of this job.

To control the scale tipped with risk, the fastest way is to have reward on the other side.

“I understand, please let me make the rockets.”

I agreed to the job at night.

After all, when you're troubled, just find Maekawa.

六章『誰かさんの思い出になる日』

<丹羽 真>
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の青春ポイント合計　−11

<藤和エリオ>
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の社会復帰ポイント合計　−48

<藤和女々>
●変動イベントとくに無し。

現在の幸福ポイント合計　+3

Chapter 6 - The Day That Will Become Someone's Memory

And like so, the RPG team of a male player consisting of one guy and three girls headed toward the Touwa household after school. With a flower in each hand, I didn't even have another for the girl stuffed in the basket. I found her walking back home from work with no shoes on, so I picked her up. The tension between her and Ryuushi-san seemed to only exist for the latter though. As for Erio, she'd shown nothing but a blank face.

Ryuushi-san sighed on the way to the bicycle lot: "Ah~ Now the position of starters is further away from me~ I don't wanna be the secret weapon anymore~" The Touwa household isn't exactly a paradise of hope and dreams that's worth visiting. There is someone who can light firecrackers with her brain there though.

"Hoh~ So this is Touwa's house?"

Parking first into the front yard, Maekawa-san carefully observed that residence that should be a fairly normal house. Perhaps due to looking up for too long (like five seconds) she moaned, 'wuu~' almost stumbling. Although she seemed the type who won't give in to pressure, her body seems slave to her blood flow. She mentioned before that 'I've never been to a hospital;' if possible, I hope she could live on peacefully.

"Whoa~" With a helmet still on her head, Ryuushi-san awed at the building and trod to my side as if avoiding Erio: "I thought maybe the walls would be covered in futons, but it's just a pretty house!"

Ryuushi-san earnestly reported on the gap between her imagination and the real deal. Hearing the comment, Erio shot her a glance, but didn't dissent. She merely stared at her house. For her, she might have the terrifying thought of 'that's not bad at all.' She is, after all, the fanatic that would surprise people if she doesn't collect blanket catalogs.

"I thought it'd be covered by a white sheet."

Maekawa-san, too, followed. I've seen this somewhere![55]

Bell signifying some sort of break resounded from an elementary school nearby. I've been there before: it's a school about ten minutes away from the Touwa residence. Erio attended there as well. Contradicting the problem that is the falling birthrate, the amount of students there seem to multiply like biscuits in a pocket. Currently, the school is undergoing renovation and expansion of classrooms. This probably means that couples get along well around here. [56]

Affected by the bell, we moved toward the entrance like students at the field toward classrooms after lunch has ended. Judging strictly by her appearance, the warrior Maekawa-san took vanguard, followed by Ryuushi-san, me and Erio. Being in the middle of Ryuushi-san and Erio, I should feel proud. But for Erio, maybe she just wanted to 'prepare for an ambush.' What could she possibly be fighting against? The world has an apparent animosity for her, so she probably doesn't have many comrades. There's Meme-san and Tamura Oba-san.

And... me? At least for now. Would this be considered as indecisiveness?

“Hm, door's locked.” The leading Maekawa-san voiced her objection at the solidity of the door and the common sense of all households.

“Usually people lock their houses when they leave.” I took out the key and went next to Maekawa-san.

“We don't, more often than not.”

“For whom it may concern, did you hear that~?”

I ridiculed her and opened the door. “It's opening!” For some reason, Maekawa-san became excited. Pulling the door ajar, she seemed strangely cheerful, closing and opening it repeatedly. I decided to let her be.

Taking the key out, I glanced back, only to find Ryuushi-san and Erio fixed on their spot.

“And why are you two just standing there? Saving someone's spot?”

There isn't entrance limit, and no one will get mad if you cut the line.

“Since Niwa-kun is the third, I'm saving your spot as a healer.”

She maintained a cheery look; with a victory sign, she boasted.

You're the most healing thing here.

Yet from just a second ago, Nervousness— or rather, anxiety — crept up in my guts. Strictly speaking, this isn't my house, but the fact that two girls are coming into my room choked the top of my stomach.

Not one on one, but one vs. many. It's an anomalous situation. The Youth-points who thought their time has come froze, doubtful and without direction. I too wondered what would happen.

“We're coming in!” Finally tired of the toy that is the door, Maekawa-san entered the entrance with a casual greeting. “Excuse me, I'm coming in!” Ryuushi-san bashfully spoke, turning to Erio halfway through the sentence. As expected of the polite helmet girl.

And the last two said 'I'm home.' We even received the normal reaction of 'welcome!' Maekawa-san, who had speedily took off her flats, welcomed us kindly. A lot about this was questionable. She must have realized too, awkwardly scratching her head:

“I screwed up. That's for my house; it should have been welcome home.”

Seemed like she still couldn't amend the mistake completely. Hm, if I could trade the house owner with Maekawa-san, I will gladly toss that big kid out. Only, she would come back faster than a salmon.

“House? What does your family do, Maekawa-san?” Setting her shoes next to Maekawa-san's, Ryuushi-san inquired with a straight back. “Oh, you live in the city, so you don't know, huh. Ryuushi.”

“I told ya I'm Ryuuko.”

“My house runs a pub in the shopping district, so you have to come when you're old enough, Ryuushi… Given that if the pub is still runnin' by then!”

Ahahah~ Since I can't articulate any better, I'll just laugh. Maekawa-san's expression conveyed so.

“Anyhow, let's go to transfer student's room. Which floor?” Maekawa-san pointed toward the hallway.

“Second floor. But there's seriously nothing interesting in there.”

“What are you on about, transfer student? Using poker as an example, there's nothing fun about a single card: the point is how to use that card in an interesting way.”

She dauntlessly asserted the lack of fun of a room she's never been in. I couldn't help but feel that maybe I should have put something like a game console in my room, knowing that others will criticize my lack of entertainment value. I had one in my old home, but I think I sold it when I moved.

A person befitting of being a tour guide, Maekawa-san led us forward as if directing her family. With this kind of advance, the distance sound of a whistle was almost audible.

A guy mixed with three girls. This made me think of Sw*mmy for some reason. Man, I miss that! Speaking of which, wasn't there a story called “The Red Fruit Has Burst” in our textbook? What was it about? I thought it's about a girl going out to buy fishes… I think, but that's not the point of the story. But whatever with that.[57]

Maekawa-san stepped onto the stairs, peeking inside Erio's room.

“Mm? This Touwa's room?”

“Yes.” A tiny confirmation from the back.

“I see~ It sure suits you… Ah, that's the school uniform. For cosplaying?”

“No, it is not.” Erio denied Maekawa-san's biased evaluation of the uniform.

Then why? I wanted Erio to spill the answer, but she simply looked down and grasped at her skirt, silencing the owner of the voice.

“Ah, it's Mr. Pluto!” [58]

On the other hand, what piqued Ryuushi-san's attention was the tan-coloured doll sitting on the ball chair. It's a… creature (?) of roughly forty centimeters long. On it's head was a hair not unlike the parents of a certain Isono family, and he's even got a red ribbon. Pluto? Does it have anything to do with space? It is sitting in Erio's room. Um… Is the discovery of such creature on Pluto human's spearhead of discovery? NASA would drop their jaws.[59]

It's a cute doll that girls seem to like. Ryuushi-san hurried into the room and hugged the doll that's strikingly larger than her face. “How cute~ Boing!” You are so damn cute, I thought as I peered at that face.[60] Tug, tug. Erio pulled on my sleeve from behind. I only looked back.

“T-that's mine...”

She's like a little girl angry with her older sister who stole her toy, telling her mom.

“...Then tell her.” I am not your brother — we're practically the same age.

“Wuu.. Wu...”

Erio closed in onto Ryuushi-san and forcefully took the plushy away. Uh, back? It is hers, but her action was unreasonable.

“Eh? ...Ah?” Ryuushi-san's dreamy visage was torn by that momentum; her fingers quivered.

“H-he sits here.” Erio put the plushy back to where it was.

“S-sorry…?”

Ryuushi-san haltingly apologized like she'd just accidentally sat on a house made of match sticks.

Just like before, an enigmatic air twisted between the two. As if veiled by a thick cloth, they could never reach each others.

Why are these two so awkward? The girl who has the sensibility of the world (? Questionable, but I won't take it back now) just can't be friends with the futon roll who strayed from common sense?

Then the bystander Maekawa-san spoke her thought regarding the plushy:

“How childish of you, Ryuushi, satisfied with a doll of only that size.”

A giantess preached so. She even sighed disapprovingly. She also seemed to have misunderstood why Ryuushi-san was so happy.

“If it were me, a 179.9cm Mr. Pluto is totally possible.”

“Don't do it.” It would be a different breed of creature at that point.

“Hm. 'Kay, now, to the long-awaited room of Niwa-kun!”

Ryuushi-san went 'Oh~!' leading her feet out with her right arm. Becoming the leader, she traded place with Maekawa-san, increasing the distance from Erio by one more space. If we do the same thing again, would this team of four recombine like in old games, letting Ryuushi-san follow Erio next? I suddenly had the feeling. Is my brain also shorting out because of Meme-san's radiation? The thought worried me.

“Hoh~ So this is Niwa-kun's room?”

Ryuushi-san firstly peeked into my room, leaving phrases of impression.

“Hoh~ So this is the room where transfer student rolls around on the floor in.”

Maekawa-san described the space. Apparently even the way I use it was set.

“Hoh~ The cousin's room.” Why did you follow them, Erio? Don't you come here all the time?

From my point of view, it would be terrifying if things worth looking increased in my room. I sat on the chair pulled away from the desk, observing the two classmates wandering the room. Hmm, the usually boring room suddenly lit up.

As long as these two are in the room, they could even replace an air freshener.

Erio, finding nothing interesting in the room, jumped onto the bed; then as if rolling the futon on her, she spun to the side….

“What kinda prank is this?” I pulled on her right leg.

Extracted by me from the futon, Erio blinked as if wondering 'what's the problem?' head slightly cocked.

“What are you doing?”

“That is my question: what is the cousin doing?”

“I'm only doing what's natural as your cousin. Stop putting that on.”

“I am playing as the hardworking sixteen year old who wants to wear relaxing clothes at home.”

“Shut up.”

“My smell might get on it.”

“I. Don't. Care.”

I can't believe she remembered that irrelevant detail. The strange prediction-sketch of Erio turning into Meme-san in twenty four years has been penciled. Rough draft next?

“Hey… Hey~ Niwa-kun.” Ryuushi-san called. Slightly thorny in her enunciation, I reflexively straightened my slightly-hunched back.

“Hm? What is it?” The eyes that gazed lost their sharpness, round like always:

“Is this the deep-see animal atlas ya mentioned?”

Ryuushi-san, who had scanned the bookshelf, put her finger on the spine of a book.

“Yeah, that's it. There's a ton of picture in there. It's a lot cooler than the other books!”

“Hoh~” She retrieved the atlas and flipped through it: “Uwah, the naked photos of ugly-cute characters!” As usual, her impressions were kind of twisted.

If Ryuushi-san were brought to a zoo, would she accuse them of public display of indecency?

“Um, which do ya like, Niwa-kun?”

She sat directly on the floor, opening the atlas about the size of a hardcover book. Then Ryuushi-san beckoned, asking me to come to her side. “Coming.” I accepted the invite.

I kneeled on one knee next to Ryuushi-san's right. On the page that Ryuushi-san had open were four deep-sea octopuses. My favourite creature was not swimming in there.

“This is so cute!” She pointed at the Dumbo Octopus in the middle.

“I know!” I indulged her. It's not like it'd be a problem liking one more animal.

“Then which one do ya recommend the most?”

“Um, I would say~” Confirming the page on the bottom left, I calculated how many pages need to be flipped back. Sixteen pages later, I pointed at the picture on the bottom left.

“Helicolenus Hilgendorfii?” Ryuushi-san read its name.

“Yeah, isn't it pretty?”

A red fish with a white crown flung its tail fin.

“It is, even though it's around a buncha freaky animals.”

“I like the way it stands out.”

“Oh~ But Niwa-kun, you shouldn't stand out, okay?”

“Hm, of course...” Sensing a gaze on the top of my head, I looked up.

Erio sat on the bed, her eyes fixed on us. The moment our sight met, she seemingly intentionally hid into the futon. “Haa, really?” What does she want, my attention?

Damn kid. If this goes on, she might become a great big kid.

I loosened the curled leg and waist, moving toward Erio. **I can fly**~ I lightly landed, and from the corner ripped the futon off. This was even more ungentlemanly than tono-sama's sash-pulling game![61]

“Oh~ no~” For some reason Maekawa-san provided a voice-over from behind. Speaking of which, what is Maekawa-san looking for around the room? I did have a prediction though. [62]

Because the way she walked and scanned was just like a certain 39 years old child.

“This room lacks the colour of skin.”

What kind of thought was that? This isn't where a serial killer hides dead bodies.

“Hey~ Niwa-kun, c'mere~ c'mere!”

Ryuushi-san waved at me again with a warmer attitude. Am I a hot item or what?

What, has my time of being popular come? But don't let all of it out, drag this out forever!

Youth-points are thing that won't react if directly approached.

“I'm coming~” I held onto the corner of the blanket, stretching my body as far as I can toward Ryuushi-san. My neck extended to the maximum, peering over the atlas from the top. My head almost rammed into Ryuushi-san's.

“What else do ya like? ...Hey, why not just let go of the blanket?”

“Uh. Well, if I let go, a certain someone will become the local mascot.”

“Why not just tie her up? Let her roll around over there.”

Dammit, she's only so relaxed because she's not dealing with her. She even started pouting. Is she jealous? I'm gonna assume you are. Don't underestimated the power that is the delusion of a self-conscious highschooler. If that was true though, uh… The hell do I do? Crap, the solution known as 'experience' isn't doing it's job on guiding me. Because it doesn't exist!

“Hey~ Transfer student, look.”

“Hah?” I looked back to Maekawa-san's voice.

With half the blanket rolled on her, Erio hopped on my bed!

“Gah~!!” The dust's everywhere! What a waste, I'm going to have to vent the room now!

And why are you just sitting there elegantly with a smile, Maekawa-san?! Go find some porn!

“Niwa-kun, click, click!” As if to sooth me, who had left, Ryuushi-san summoned.

Am I a stray cat? Is this below or above being classmates?

In the end, I ran around the blanket between Erio and Ryuushi-san thirty times.

Drenched in sweat, I opened the window regretfully. The air of girls and the heat escaped outside.

Out of the window, the colour of dusk began to swallow the edge of the sky. The world was as if flipped.

Only one person would appear when trouble's amok. Everyone should know.

The person whose personality and other aspects vex people to no end — Touwa Meme-san. When the girls were about to take off, they bumped into the returning Meme-san. Incidentally, they both called her smooth-skinned sensei.

Looks like both Maekawa-san and Ryuushi-san had met Meme-san. Now that I mentioned it, Ryuushi-san seemed to have received cola from Ryuushi-san before, but Maekawa-san… What was it? I don't see their connection.

Meme-san whispered a few words to Maekawa-san, clapped her hand saying 'Okay~! It's settled!' first and then declared 'I'm heading out again;' Maekawa-san also claimed that she is heading home and put on her shoes. She said she was going to get something to bring back here… What on earth is going on?

If it were the usual, Meme-san shouldn't be baited by this kind of a festival. But she did look busy. Is she conniving something? It's hard to tell because she's always playing practical jokes.

Meme-san further proposed something similar to this: “Since I won't be home, how about the girls do some cooking?”

“Cough, cough, so I don't have to cook, cough cough.”

“I don't get why you coughed.”

After waves of disturbance, Ryuushi-san decided to call home first. Decided to stay in the Touwa household till later, she planned on going home after waiting for Maekawa-san, doing some activities; and cooking and eating.

And thus Meme-san and Maekawa-san left the house. Erio, Ryuushi-san and I remained.

…This is practically a development for 'let's build a love triangle.'

Well, it's because of the words Meme-san tossed us that muddled the air, making me and Ryuushi-san extra conscious of each others.

We stared at each other with a twisted smile. One of us moved first, and the other two followed behind. Step, step. Only the sound of footstep echoed lightly.

In the living room, with Erio as the apex, adding me and Ryuushi-san, we mimicked a triangle sitting in front of the table.

"......" Erio, who rarely sat upright, said nothing. She rubbed her upper arm as if conveying her anxiety over bare skin. Her eyes oscillated.

"Ah, uh… I wonder what Maekawa-san's bringin'~"

Ryuushi-san faced me, talking to me instead of Erio.

"I have no idea. What could it be?." Could be a costume. But I refrained from speaking.

"Hm, I wonder..." Voices trailed off, and the conversation paused here.

If it were only me and Erio, or only me and Ryuushi-san, then any sort of conversation could become lively, but at the moment… How strange.

The ticking of clock that should be the sound of a daily life did not resonate. The room was completely silent. Ringing in the ear proliferated. The chirping of crickets that starts in the beginning of autumn shared the same unpleasant feeling as the current situation.

My nose dried; the taste of burn permeated in my throat. This was the syndrome of boredom.

"Want to watch… TV?" Erio held the remote and peeked at my face. Is this the conclusion she reached to cope with idleness?

"Sure." I agreed; the TV shone.

On the screen gradually lighting up, sushi appeared. It looked to be a show promoting shops with fresh and delicious high-class sushi. The reporter and celebrity whose name escapes me shoved tuna sushi into his mouth, yelling 'so good.' He said nothing else in terms of compliments.

Since the volume was set on loud, the initially silent room suddenly flooded with noise. The various sound effects and BGM forced into my eardrum, suffocating me.

Now we're even more anxious. The overfilling noise and the current status of the room was too different.

I couldn't stand it anymore and left the seat, taking my time in the kitchen making tea.

After preparing tea for three people, I returned to the living room. The two still bored holes into the TV.

“Here, some tea.”

I put the tea in front of Erio. She looked down on the tea, staring into her reflection within.

For reasons unknown, she pushed to slide the tea in front of Ryuushi-san. The rising steam followed after.

“Here, tea.”

Basing her conclusion on something, Ryuushi-san slid the cup of tea to me. Are we playing the game of 'the bar scene you always see in cowboy flicks'?

“… A cup of tea.”

I attempted to give the tea to Erio again. She unhesitatingly handed the tea to Ryuushi-san. “Here, tea.” Though frowning, Ryuushi-san still returned the cup of tea to me. As if annoyed with following behind, the steam occasionally moved to the side instead of wasting energy going up.

I thought the thirst of boredom seemed to moisten by the ascending steam.

After that, the cup of team circled endlessly on the table.

The remaining two cups of tea were ostracized from the table, slowly losing the steam that is the candle of life.

In the midst of it, I reminisced the day of being forced to do can-crushing during an activity of kid's day.

☆

After about forty minutes, Maekawa-san came back.

“I'm home!” Somehow, she announced her return with the manner of the patriarch of the house.

Yet, there isn't anyone who could change the ambiance better than she. As expected of 'when you're troubled, just find her' Maekawa-san.

The light steps unfitting of her height approached the living room.

The person who entered the room was a Santa in white carrying a bag with no dreams inside.

"Since I am taking up role of professor, I am returning to the basics: lab coat."

With the height of 179.9cm (self-proclaimed) and a lab coat over her uniform, the infirmary doctor with glasses moved forward briskly, carrying on her shoulder a plastic bag. If she were to appear during play house, you'd worry about having your stomach cut open — that's the anxiety caused by the sharp aura exuding from her.

Empty bottles filled the bag. In addition, things that resembled nozzles lied on the bottom.

"By the way, the glasses are fake. For fashion purposes." She pushed the glasses up with her free hand.

"Whoa~ That's so cool!" Ryuushi-san looked up in awe.

Indeed, with her complimentary height, the outfit beautifully conveyed the sense of coolness.

"Hehe." Having her serious cosplay praised accordingly, Maekawa-san chuckled joyfully and said: "I'm taking this cup of tea." Her long arm lifted the blue cup and dumped the tea in her mouth.

"What the? It's at the perfect temperature!"

It didn't sound like a protest against the cold tea, but a praise. Looks like Maekawa-san is afraid of heat.

"Okay, so what you got there?"

I queried for the three of us. "Oh." The cup left Maekawa-san's lips.

"We're making bottle rockets! That's smooth-skinned sensei's request. She said to have Touwa and the transfer student make them. These are the material."

Swoosh~ She lifted the bag. This was Meme-san's malicious plan? Or a part of it?

"I got some for Ryuushi too — you're joining us too, right?" Maekawa-san watched for Ryuushi-san's reaction; she tilted her head with finger on her lips:

"Hmmm. I… donno how to make one. And I told ya I'm Ryuuko. Don't go settling on that nickname."

"No problem, I'll teach you. I know the steps enough to teach."

"Then I'll try~ But why, all of the sudden? I mean Touwa-san's mom."

"Who knows?" Maekawa-san revealed a meaningful smile, dodging the question.

"Touwa or transfer student, one of you go get scissors and knives from Meme-san's room… I mean, could you bring me to her room? I think the tools we need are in her room."

"Then, follow me." I stopped Erio halfway as she got up and left the living room with Maekawa-san.

Using the chance that we had walking in the hallway with lights brighter than the sun, I questioned Maekawa-san.

"Hey, Maekawa-san."

"Hm? What is it? Also starting from now and throughout the bottle making, call me doctor."

Hands in her white coat pocket, Maekawa-san requested a change in profession.

If only Ryuushi-san could change her name as easily as she.

"…Doctor Maekawa." Rolled off the tongue easier than Meme-chan.

"Hm, hm!" Shoulders trembling, she smiled satisfactorily.

"The rockets from a while back — are they related to this?"

"Hoh, how keen of you!"

Mae… Doctor Maekawa whistled as if complimenting the exceptional answer from her student:

"But one does not need to know the language of flower to appreciate its beauty, transfer student."

"What I'm concerned with is if this is somehow related to me and Erio."

"Neither do I know the meaning of flower, unfortunately."

Her metaphoric response blurred my comprehension.

“Oh, I know this: red spider lily means ‘sad recollection,’ ‘the desire to meet again,’ and ‘I miss only you.’”

“I think the topic is going into the wrong direction…”

“In any case, it’s not a big deal! They are just bottles.”

Ultimately, she brushed me off.

In the story that progressed elsewhere, what role do I exactly play?

“Alrighty. Doctor Maekawa’s class will now begin.”

In the living room sitting on the opposite side of the table, Doctor Maekawa declared the start of her crafting class.

On my sides were Erio and Ryuushi-san. The students were fully prepared. Only…

…Um, am I being used as a screen to separate the two?

Won’t it be better to have these two get along? Ryuushi-san seems to frequent Tamura shop anyway. But is it okay for me to be so nosy? This was the true question.

“Do you remember how to make them, Touwa?” Maekawa-san surveyed to see if Erio had the proper knowledge.

“…Don’t know.” My left neighbor hurriedly shook her head.

“You should have made them in art class before, since we went to the same school.”

“Um, I took it home to have mom help me, so…”

Erio shrunk embarrassedly and confessed. Have mom help probably actually meant ‘Meme-san made almost everything.’ Appeared to have noticed, Maekawa-san grimaced:

“Then we’ll say you have a permit! Alright, first grab a bottle.”

Following her direction, all three of us laid the bottles on the table. We had a total of five, which will all be used when we finished. I didn’t know that till today.

“Next, pick up the nozzles that was given beforehand and screw that onto the bottle.”

I screwed the nozzles that sat on the bottom tightly onto the neck of the bottle. Compare to me and Ryuushi-san, Erio had a bit of trouble, but still successfully completed the task.

“Now we’re done with that, set it aside. Prepare the second bottle.”

“Done, Doctor Maekawa!” Ryuushi-san feigned an innocent reply. She’s pretty good at being a student. Wait, she is a student.

“See that line on the lower half? Cut the bottom off with the box cutter. Since we only have one, we have to take turns.”

Like doing a demo, Maekawa-san adroitly cut off the butt: “The trick is to not move the knife, but rather spin the bottle forward to cut it — just like shaving an apple!”

After giving the advice, Maekawa-san passed the box cutter to Ryuushi-san. “Whacha call it, I miss crafting classes~” Ryuushi-san worked while humming a tune. I’m envious of how she could seemingly enjoy everything.

I too finished without any problem. As for Erio, everyone held his or her breath as we watched. Erio clamped the knife with strength enough to bruise her fingers. “Uh, relax a little. But do hold on to it.”

She slightly loosened the grip. Then she clawed the bottle, her fingers digging in. “This isn’t a disposal site… But do hold on to it.” She eased a bit. And so… screech, screech… the knife sunk into the bottle. She gingerly exerted enough force that might snap the blade. If the cutter slip off, a part of Erio along with the clothes might end up split apart. I prayed for her safety.

Perhaps it was answered: she cut opened the bottle safely. Is everyone going to be on the edge from now on when it’s Erio’s turn? I swallowed the epiphany like a stone.

“… Uh, well then. Next step is to cut the extra part below that line. The key is to start from the bottom…” And like so, the project proceed under Maekawa-san’s guidance.

Next was to use the third bottle to make the base. Again, a rough cut with the box cutter, and then finer detail with the scissors; thus the rocket was mostly complete.

“With the PE rocket head as the tip, the second bottle on the top, the first on the bottom, and the base last… Here we are, the completed body!”[63]

Combined with their parts, the rockets without wing stood on the floor. Ryuushi-san and I both tried putting the rockets together while Erio cut away on the bottle.

Although I offered help, she insisted, ‘No need. I must do it this time.’ Hence I stared from the side. From the bystander’s view point, I was terrified. Now I understand why Meme-san is so protective of her.

“Apparently the rockets are undergoing test-flight tomorrow.” Maekawa-san spoke.

“Tomorrow?”

“Eleven of clock, the closest beach. Meme-san’s instruction.”

If she whispered the instructions of making rockets to Maekawa-san, then I imagine Meme-san must be related to this whole thing. The closest beach — is it the one Erio and I went on that night? Riding there takes at least an hour!

After Erio’s finished with her work, Maekawa-san shifted direction to the making of wings. The parts cut off from the bottles were flattened with a piece of wood. This was the only part Maekawa-san performed poorly on. After forcing it down for a while… “Gwahh…” This person planned on throwing her dignity away with the lab coat effect.

Pliers could be used to stabilize the ridges on the flattened wing prototype. Next, label it with a marker and cut it. Stick the two pieces together with double-sided tape and staple them. Finally, cover the staple mark with electric tapes. The wing is now finished.

Now to put the wings on in an X shape on the body (this was is the hardest part). Connect it to the rocket with electric tape, then you can yell ‘done!’ And then wait for Erio to finish. I knew it. Ryuushi-san’s and my rockets weren’t exactly artistic on the taping part, but they at least had the shape. I inspected it in my hand. The forgotten sense of achievement from making something alleviated the growing exhaustion that weighed my skull down, warming up my head.

I switched the TV that’s never been off onto the news to check the time. It was already past seven, almost eight. In other words, we spent about an hour and half on making rockets. On one hand, I understood starvation. On the other, I was shocked at how late city girls are allowed to stay out. If it were where I used to live, if there was someone outside after eight PM, they’d be considered suspicious. A lax night like this would be upon every family by now.

“The night is full.” Eyes glued on the TV, Maekawa-san mumbled. Eh? So the city uses the same standard?

“Yeah, it’s about time to go home.”

“We have to prepare dinner for Touwa and the transfer student first.”

Hearing Maekawa-san’s words, Ryuushi-san winced. She stared at me, while I her. Ugh, Meme-san’s words echoes in my head. Just like the person herself, they were annoying.

In the spare time, Maekawa-san even decorated the rockets. She coloured the thing white to imitate a certain stream-line creature with strange wings. She called it ‘**skyfish**.’[64]

“I’ve never seen the actual thing, so this is just referring to the manga.”

“Of course ya wouldn’t!”

Ryuushi-san’s sheepish eyes moved away from me, observing the rockets from all sorts of angles while replying to Maekawa-san.

But in this town, it is said that **skyfish** has been witnessed frequently. Maekawa-san spoke as if to herself:

“Since tomorrow is flight, we won’t have time for a test. Having all of them fly up gracefully would be impossible though. These rockets probably won’t be mistaken as UFO trails; they’ll just crash midway. Maybe my **skyfish** will end its life as a **seafish**.”

And then Maekawa-san looked askance at Erio, divulging a jeering grin:

“I guess the only way is to have a fishing line hang it from space, huh.”

Was Erio equipped with the sense to detect that she had just been the butt of a space joke?

She ceased the work on hand, slightly pouting. Maekawa-san, who looked from the side, relaxed her expression and squinted. Instead of a quip, it was more a subtle smile:

“I look forward to it, Touwa. Use your space power and send these rockets upward!”

Okay, class is over. Now to the self-provided lunch. Meme-san’s still not home.

Looking at it this way: having done an unusual project and cooked dinner, it’s like a summer camp or something. It’s rather exciting.

And I get to eat food made by girls. This was unquestionably a three-pointer. The food itself is trivial — what matters is the act.

The conclusion was that everyone including me had to make a dish. The maximum occupancy of the kitchen was two, so we decided to have Maekawa-san and Ryuushi-san go first, then me and Erio next.

Erio and I sat in the kitchen's chairs, appreciating the beauty in front of us. Sitting from the back and seeing the classmates in apron, I savoured the taste of youth. Maekawa-san still had the lab coat though.

Not too long ago, Erio, whose mother remarked her cooking skill as 'as long as it's a ham sandwich, she can make it,' seemed satisfied with the rocket she made. She went as far as carrying it here, unable to stop grinning at her own creation. The surface was painted black; the uneven texture further emphasized the handmade feeling.

"This is the third one ever made."

"Oh? Meme-san made the other?"

Slumping as if her spine was shattered by shame, Erio shrunk her chin. But she sat up again. The black rocket danced in the air via human power, occupying my view.

"But this one is mine."

"Yes, yes, very impressive."

I casually rubbed her head.

Surprisingly, it wasn't a bad feeling seeing her shook around happily.

Because of the knife that shone dimly on the hand of Ryuushi-san who looked back, I terminated my action swiftly. Um… She does look like she's sulking! In other words, she is somewhat interested in me? Umm… This requires further inspection.

If Ryuushi-san's target turns out to be Erio, then I will be mortified.

The complicated feeling of joy and confusion swelled in my chest; looking at the back of the girls, I awaited my debut. Occasionally I have to deal with the rocket girl neighbor; I even thought about having the hydro-powered rocket fly into space.

"It's done!" In just about twenty minutes, Maekawa-san reported. Only, both of them hid their dishes behind. "Before the last dishes are done, they're secret." Ryuushi-san said coyly.

Following their wishes, I avoided looking at their food and simultaneously switched place with them. Erio ruefully put the rocket in the corner of the kitchen, stiffly taking from Ryuushi-san the apron. “Looks like you two need to be lubricated!” Maekawa-san teased. I thought the same thing too.

As I contemplated on what to make, Erio returned from the fridge with some ham, laid them on the cutting board and chopped — or battered — away. I thought of the zombie mom of a dead family who went inside an abandoned house and pretended to be alive by making sounds. What does she plan on making? [65]

I just made something simple. I picked up two eggs, since making anything extraordinary was impossible.

And like so, Erio and my dishes were complete. We both set them on the table.

Four bowls embellished with food, the colour combination sufficiently covered by just grey scale.

“Why did everyone decide to have rice covered by things?”

“It’s easy.” “My specialty.” “Here, ham.”

I wanted to stamp ‘learn Japanese’ on the forehead of the last person.

“This is an Oyakodon. It got cold though.”

Maekawa-san began the introduction of her dish. Compared to the ones served at school café, hers had prettier egg, and better smell. Everyone wordlessly extended their chopsticks, screaming ‘so good!’ like the celebrity on TV. It wasn’t that we didn’t have the vocabulary, we just rather spend time eating than talking — compliments should only be mentioned after eating the meal.

Since Ryuushi-san avoided those chickens, I snatched them away.

But, shouldn’t the best be the last? From the half-full stomach, I pulled out a similar regret:

“But, hm, this definitely deserves three points.”

To secure the sudden points, dibs must be called. Since I’ve been taking care of Erio recently, I felt as if my Youth-points had been dropping.

“Points… Well, I take that as a compliment.”

Maekawa-san didn’t seem unaccepting, taking the cleaned bowl away.

Next up, Ryuushi-san raised the bowl with a smile of slight embarrassment and anticipation like when she showed me the doodling on her notebook:

“Mine is an Oyakodon with no chicken.”

So the ‘Oya’ part evaporated?

“Uh… Then it should be called Tamagodon?” I stared at the bowl with a question.

“But I heard that Niwa-kun likes Oyakodon!”

She grumbled. Where did that rumor come from? …Ah, from Maekawa-san? True, I remember praising the Oyakodon served at the school cafeteria a month ago. But that was just a comment on the school’s cooking, not for Oyakodon itself… Well, it isn’t too late to make this my favourite dish today.

Also, since it’s the same as Maekawa-san’s, she had meant it to be? Hmm, the smell of gunpowder.

“What’s the big deal~ Just try it. Here ya go~”

Ryuushi-san passed the bowl to my mouth; the other two crossed their chopsticks in the air. The atmosphere now does not permit food sharing.

Is Ryuushi-san’s food only for me (俺専用)? Or is it for folding (折れ専用)? Not knowing her intent, I wavered.

In the background, Maekawa-san grinned mischievously. Hm, eggs, hold up… There's something else in there. I rolled the object several times on my tongue. It's shaped like a carrot. Not chicken, but it's a bit soft. Oh well, I bit down on this mysteriously textured object. Then, sweet juice flowed between the teeth. One hundred percent fruit.

“...” I swallowed the thing first. “Hey, Ryuushi-san?” The after taste was just as mellifluous.

“How was it?”

Just like the 'how does it look?' after a girl tried on new clothes, it was a forceful rhetorical question.

However, before I critic the taste, I must point something out:

“Is there pineapple in here?”

“Mm.” She confirmed earnestly, the smile still intact.

“So Ryuushi-san likes the pineapple in sweet and sour porks, huh?”

The background with two people setting their chopsticks on the table and sipping their tea looked mighty alluring.

"I love it. Personally I love sweeter flavour." I especially spoke with the volume audible to Maekawa-san while shoving the pineapple-don in my mouth.

"Um… Is it good? How's it taste?"

"Mom taught me to not talk with my mouth full."

"Weren't ya just talking normally?"

Once people start asking about my thought on the taste, I gloss over with that phrase. In the end, I cleaned the entire bowl on my own.

My throat is so sweet. Upon downing the tea, a blurring bitterness suffused in my mouth, somehow nauseating me.

The next two entrees weren't interesting, so I'll introduce them both.

"Fried-egg don." Mine. Referring to the cooking manga Meme-san has.

"Ham-don." It was literally sliced ham slapped on steaming rice. Because of the remaining amount of rice in the steamer, there's wasn't much in there. This was of course Erio's product.

With nothing particularly worth noting, the four of us ate quietly. Not that I moved my chopsticks. Although toward the end everyone entered the mode of 'I'm tired of rice' and dropped his or her chopsticks, we finished laboriously.

"Thanks for the food..." The listless voices of thanks crawled in the kitchen.

Perhaps having eaten Maekawa-san's Oyakodon first was the right choice. In the end, my stomach was too filled to taste anything anymore.

Being too full, no one planned on leaving his or her seat. We merely waited lethargically.

Though the thought of cleaning dishes poked from the corner of my mind, the lower half of my body refused to move the encumbering torso.

"Ah, it's almost nine. Aren't ya heading back, Maekawa-san?"

Ryuushi-san seemed to probe her with a 'I won't leave before ya do!'

"Yep." Maekawa-san nodded affirmatively, even smirking. But before anything came from her lips, Erio, sitting beside me, popped up:

"Um, staying… over?"

"Eh?" Maekawa-san and I both seized.

The shock wasn't just from the act of 'staying over' — it was from the act of

Erio's proposal.

In addition, the only vegetarian in a sports club jumped at the words:

“W-w-w-what are ya saying~!!”

Ryuushi-san pecked furiously at Erio. She's pretty energetic after the meal.

“Uh… I mean… Is it not good? It's… dark out… and dangerous… Like, aliens… and stuff.”

Erio stuttered incoherently for excuses. But Erio, the androphobic girl, was suggesting others to stay.

Is she happy to be able to spend times with girls of her own age after so long?

Well, since she had the attitude of wanting to connect with others, her return-to-society points indeed increased… Uh, this might be the first and the last time it will ever increase along with my Youth-points.

Originally gawking, Maekawa-san quickly went along with Erio's proposal:

“If you insist. Meme-san did mention that we could stay if it took too long. I got clean clothes when I went to get bottles, so I'm all good!”

Ahaha! Maekawa-san laughed heartily; the lab coat fluttered.

In other words, I'm spending a night with Maekawa-san under the same roof? Ung… My heart seemed to be strangled on the top.

Ryuushi-san spun back to face us, for a second giving the illusion that only her head moved. “Absolutely shameless!” She had to give preface:

“What about Niwa-kun? Stop lazing around like a slime!”

“Hmm. I mean, what's the problem? As long as Meme-san and Erio agreed to it.”

“Whazzup with that indifferent reason?!”

“Well, this isn't exactly my house.” I am living under someone else's roof. Totally different story if it's my house though.

If a girl wanted to stay over, isn't the necessity to deny her non-existence?

“Right?” I casually sought agreement from Erio. “Right~” She parroted me. Wait, this is your house right? The persuasiveness of my statement plummeted, bring even my cognition down.

“T-t-then I'm staying over too?! W-w-what am I gonna do??”

“Ryuushi-san too… Isn't that okay though?” My heart accelerated. We're talking about living together!

“This is cheating before the graduation trip! As the disciplinary committee, I cannot over look this!”

“Oh, Ryuushi-san's disciplinary?”

While I was hospitalized during May, the class' committees had been decided; thus I was shoved into the spot of Class Meeting Committee — which no one picked. So far, I'm not thrilled by this leftover.

However, telling everyone at school that 'Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san lived at my house~' and turning the school life around awaits me! Disregarding the feeling of superiority of course.

“What about your change of clothes?” We don't have basketball club uniforms here.

“Uh, oh, I'll go grab em.” Ryuushi-san decided to sneak out of the kitchen.

“I'll lend you… mine?”

Erio once again suggested an unexpected assistance. I oh'ed, exhaling a short breath of admiration.

Ryuushi-san too, showed a look of surprise; but she nodded vaguely:

“Mm, please then?”

“Good. Goood~”

Perhaps her brain cells finally gave up, Erio replied innocently.

I could no longer deny the possibility of sleep invading her head. She usually sleeps around ten, after all.

Confused by Erio's airy mien, Ryuushi-san pulled a cellphone out of her skirt. She's calling someone, probably her parents.

“...Hello, mom. So...” Saying so, she proved my theory.

Only, the part where she contended 'I told ya I'm not running away this time~' stood out to me. Ryuushi-san ran away from home before, huh. Hearing her unexpected past, I breathed out. Yet, peering over at that soothing back, I could not make the connection with the rebellious act of running away.

Everyone has a past, sculpting him or her in ways unseen by others.

In my dreamy mind, a sense of reverence grew for only the most natural thing.

☆

Although it was the rain season of June, the air outside still chilled at the eleven of night.

Wrapping a towel on my head, I came to the yard to cool down.

Grass shuffling underneath the shoes pleased the ear. Only, a melancholy followed — 'tis time to pull the weed.

Embedded with the June rain, wet wind melted in the warm skin just out of bath. Like making up for lost moisture, the usually sticky air soothed the skin. But I guess in about ten minutes, it'd become the fuel of a disagreeable sensation.

I walked to where the two bikes were parked, peeking toward the sky.

Cloud veiled the firmament; neither stars nor the moon hung in the air. I eyed at the obscure lights flashing above the distant town.

I did successfully bath, but the girls seemed to have fought a war.

Just earlier, they caused a racket in the bathroom.

To further the atmosphere of a grad trip, the three girls decided to bath together. But soon after they entered the bathroom, unattractive screams of 'Uwah~!' or 'Gawah~!' returned.

And then, steps fueled by rage stomped in the hallway.

With her right hand covering Erio's tiny head, and the left dragging Maekawa-san, who passed out sitting in the tub, Ryuushi-san charged into the room. The only thing on her was a big towel.

It's quite rude to say this when she's gone mad, but is it really okay to give me so much Youth-points in one go? I looked straight at Ryuushi-san.

“Why is she in there with her clothes on?”

“I messed up.” Reported the Erio with water dripped off of her.

“She said she messed up.”

“On what?!”

Hearing the explanation that explained nothing, Ryuushi-san let her voice fly. But since Erio's always ran into the bathroom fully dressed, I'd already habituated as one of the Touwa residents. It's nothing to be surprised by. She did took baths with the futon on before, which resulted in her almost drowning in the tub.

“C-coordinates.” Rambling, Erio answered Ryuushi-san's question. She was a little scared, under Ryuushi-san's menacing pressure. “X or Y-axis?!” Ryuushi-san, too, threw a mindless tantrum and exacerbated the pandemonium.

“Then… What about over there?”

“Ughhhh.” Maekawa-san's hand was lifted by Ryuushi-san, her head hanging languidly.

“Why did she fry like an octopus in just a minute of sitting in the tub?!”

“Circulation was too good.”

“Not… Not enough blood...”

“That sounds like the worst combination!”

So something like that happened. From the view of the disciplinary committee, does this suffice as the preview of the graduation trip?

Meme-san came back in about thirty minutes later. She stormed in her room quickly, grumbling something about being busy tomorrow. Perhaps she was planning something about the beach tomorrow.

Depthless wind blew. Branches on the neighbor's wall shook like fans.

Maekawa-san should have come outside: it could improve the cooling rate.

Should I tell her? I turned, but changed my mind again and remained outside.

More than Maekawa-san's moaning, I wanted to continue listening to the sound of wind. The gale that blew today sounded like the echoes in the mountains of my old home — as if something soared in the sky.

Probably because of the nearby Self Defense airbase, the area was used to the sound of aircraft gliding. Was something flying? Could it really be a UFO? Or a floating bicycle?

At that moment, I heard the clank of the entrance door. Turning slightly, I saw Ryuushi-san wearing the slippers Erio doesn't like wearing. She planned on coming outside. Our eyes met; she smiled as if relieved.

“Heya.” I called out.

“Hey ya~!” She waved both hands at me. Wearing the white-blue striped pajama Erio lent her, she looked even younger. Accompanied by the slapping of slippers, she headed toward me.

“I went back to take a quick shower. It's so hot~”

“Yeah? How's Maekawa-san doing?”

“Just chilling on the hall's floor.”

“Erio?”

“Cooling that Maekawa-san with a fan.”

“Hm.” Maybe those two get along well.

“Here ya go.” Ryuushi-san stood next to me and passed a cold can of juice.

“Oh, thanks.” I took the juice, pulled the tab up and poured it in my mouth. The sour of orange.

“What if it rains tomorrow?”

“Hm. Well, if that happens, we'll just ask Meme-san.”

“True.” Ryuushi-san put her own can to her lips: “Hm, awesome.”

She gently exhaled and smiled. My heart raced at the shape of her lips.

“It sounds like something's flying through the air.”

Ryuushi-san mumbled at the cloudy sky. It sure sounded like it.

“What if a meteor came down?”

“I heard those can be predicted years before happening.”

“Jeez~ Stop saying dreamless things.”

Jokingly pouting, Ryuushi-san scolded my comment.

Dreams, you said. If a meteor hits us, the human race would be finished! But maybe some people do wish for that.

At least for now, I don't wish for a meteor. Not before I finish talking with Ryuushi-san.

“Tomorrow is actually my birthday.”

“Eh?” Surprise jolted my body, enough to necessitate my rebalancing.

Like confessing to a tiny prank, Ryuush-san smiled demurely.

If I knew a bit earlier, I would have prepared something beforehand!

“Really? We're a day early, but should we celebrate now?”

I passed the can in front of Ryuushi-san; she did the same. “Cheers!” The cans bumped. Let's celebrate a bit like this. The not-so-sweet orange juice flowed in my throat.

“I still wish that something special would happen on my birthday! I hope a meteor would come down, and bang!”

Ryuushi-san gestured her very own wish.

“Hmm. When we're done with the beach tomorrow, should we all celebrate?”

“Celebrate?”

“Having others celebrate for you isn't special or anything, but I think it's pretty important.”

Ryuushi-san blinked incessantly, finally saying with a red face: “That sounds nice too.” A tiny smile: “Mm, maybe it'd be the best!”

Perhaps assenting as well, she nodded deeply. Her gaze darted around for a bit:

“Even though it's kinda spur of the moment, but it's still kinda embarrassing.”

Heheheh. Ryuushi-san rubbed the back of her right hand:

“I mean, staying over at… A boy's place.”

“Yeah?” I played stoic. If it were me living at Ryuushi-san's house though…

“Yeah!” Ryuushi-san lifted a fist in hope for certainty.

“Well, I have already seen Ryuushi-san's sleeping face in math class before.”

“Why did ya look?!” Her eyes widened in retaliation: “And I told ya I'm Ryuuko!”

Seriously! She contendingly drank the juice. The exaggerated way she bit on the can, or rather poured the drink, was a bit childish, but cute.

“It'd be different if we shared a room. Since we don't, I'm not really that curious.”

Cough! Ryuushi-san's throat bulged. After choking, she tremblingly asked with tears in her eyes:

“D-different room… Right? Me and Niwa-kun?” Now's my turn to choke.

“D-different room.”

“Y-you’re right, mm...”

Both of our voice shifted in tone; both looked at our own feet.

Zephyr turning cold refreshed our burning cheeks.

Ah, that's right. Might as well make things clear with her.

“Ryuushi-san. About the t-t-thing from before.” My voice cracked halfway.

“B-before?” Oh? She's wavering.

The two of us hurried for a deep breath, waiting for the quake inside to settle.

“Good now?”

“Good now.”

“This is my report at this specific point of time.”

“Mm?”

“Hypothetically, Erio is walking around town when her old classmates came to harass her. And I happened to witness it.”

“...Mm.”

“If that were to happen, I will stand by Erio.”

Ryuushi-san's eyelashes shook; she looked down melancholily.

Well, I think it's dumb too.

However, I don't want to be smart enough to leave Erio to die.

“Uh… Even if it isn't Erio, but Maekawa-san or Ryuushi-san, I will stand by you as well.” I mean, everyone is a pretty girl after all.

“…...” Ryuushi-san remained mute, her left eyelid occasionally jumped.

“Whenever I plan on helping Erio, and you happen to be walking home with me, just kick me really hard in the back.”

I can't have Ryuushi-san suffer for my action. If she does just that though, she won't be seen as my friend. If she doesn't, she might even be branded as the leader.

“Even being alone, I'll still think of ways to be happy. Don't worry about me then.”

Even with just a person, a broom can still be used to rock the world. **Enjoy life**!

Moving forward to youth without accessories might be fun as well.

And as long as I stand by Erio, she would naturally do the same for me too, wouldn’t she?

Hence I tried to explain my attitude toward Erio to Ryuushi-san in the most cheerful manner.

If it does end up like that, Youth-points will probably bite the dust, falling with no way of recovering — this simultaneous, depressing feeling churned deep down in my chest.

Ryuushi-san kept her head low, wording her reply directly:

“This is purely for this specific point in time.”

“...”

Ryuushi-san looked up. It is not as if her face conveyed no emotion — a serene, almost defeated look:

“In that case, I will not stand with Touwa-san.”

“Hm.”

“But...”

After a pause, Ryuushi-san stood a step away from me.

With hands behind her back, she timidly leaned forward:

“But, I think I will stand with Niwa-kun.”

Finished, Ryuushi-san froze at the spot.

We gazed at each other.

Together we felt embarrassed.

Our faces reddened.

“Uwah~!”

She ran off. Scrambling to the entrance, she darted into the house.

I wanted to run somewhere too. Mostly to escape the embarrassment and the heart that raced even faster.

Just as I thought of this, Ryuushi-san peeked out half her face from the entrance and called me by a new name: “Mako-chan~!”

“Wha~t?”

“Ya are gonna get a cold in the wind out there, be back soon!”

“I know~!”

First replying to the mom character with shaky legs, I scratched my cheeks.

A certain object tore through the air still. I looked up to the sky.

Meteors did not slash through the clouds.

We will definitely welcome tomorrow.

“… Four, points?”

From the sense of fulfillment, and the proud smile on my face.

The following day came.

Under the urges of Erio and Maekawa-san, who were both regular early-risers, I woke up on the Eight o'clock of a day-off.

“That's pretty sad, transfer student. Can't you wake up without the chickens?”

“Waking before noon is considered as healthy in my household.”

We had the Maekawa-san's egg sandwiches and Erio's ham sandwiches for breakfast.

We shared the food, leaving the house with rockets in hand after dressing up.

As a side note, Erio wore twin tails today for some reason.

After my query in front of the shoe cabin, she quietly answered: “Because… It made the cousin happy.”

Since when have I cheered for twin tails? Is my spot in the Touwa household heading toward some weird direction? Including the various things involving Meme-san, concern brood over my mind.

“I wasn't expecting my plan of heading to the beach with you to be carried out like this.”

Maekawa-san saddled on the bicycle, flinging these words out expectantly. “Beep, beep!” Ryuushi-san, who prohibited the beach because of the jelly fishes, whistled. The frequency of that whistle was beyond my ability.

Erio naturally docked in her proper (?) spot of bicycle basket.

Touwa, you're hilarious! Like talking about escaping an island with four people on a raft that could only carry three. “When you're leaving, have one of you be part of the raft by holding on to the wood. That's how it's done.”

The example Maekawa-san drew balanced on the line between logic and nonsense, difficult to have a response for.

Thus we set off for the designated beach.

Why did I listen to Meme-san's instruction? Questions spun with the wheels, but I still pedaled onward.

The trip that took two hours with the old bike took only a bit more than an hour today.

On the beach with no superficial connection with Erio.

Six bottle rockets lined up on the platform, pointed toward the sky.

A visitor came before us. He was a suit-wearing man preparing for the launch.

Noticing us, he stopped and headed here.

“Ah, the space stalker.”

“My fan!”

“Stranger.”

“Who?”

Four people assessed the middle-aged guy in front of us. What's up with the first two?

“You are...”

“Ah, hello.”

Maekawa-san greeted. Another one of her acquaintances? Counting Meme-san, is her secret of having so many connections her vertical length? Something spoken so rudely awed me.

“Hm.” The man looked at the rockets in ours hands, nodding:

“Did Touwa Meme asked you to come?”

“Yes.” The person reacting the fastest to her mother's name was none other than Erio.

‘Just as I thought.’ The man happily softened his expression:

“Then let's get going; not that there's anything left to be done, but you all should prepare to launch your own rockets. If you need to, I'll help too.”

He directed with a kind attitude, willing to lend a hand.

Seemingly unfamiliar with him, Erio cocked her head quizzically.

“Let's get ready early, since we don't know when Meme's showing up.”

The middle-aged man urged us, his hands preciously holding on to a crimson bottle rocket.

Perhaps noticing my stare, he ostentatiously raised the red device with a wry grin.

“This is just a bonus; I'll get ready myself so don't touch it.”

“Oh no!” Now that I think about it, I think I forgot to wake Meme-san up.

The man turned to face the beach — in just a moment, he mumbled:

“My youth's on you. Counting on ya.”

The words floated into my ears. And so I decided to help out.

I'm a total adolescent guy (青春男). It might look like it's pronounced Ao-Haru-O, but I emphasize:

It's pronounced Seishun Otoko. Earnest to the point of stupidity.

Honestly, I had no clue why things ended up like this.

Am I entwined with something? I don't know, but I am currently swept up with it. That's what I thought.

But, well, who cares about the little thing?

Occasionally helping others get Youth-points sounds good too.

Especially if it's a five pointer, I will share the same glory.

七章『ツィオルコフスキーの祈り』

<丹羽 真>

●女子の手料理。	+3
●女子にガサ入れされた。	−2
●同級生の女子二人が 一つ屋根の下で寝泊まり。	+3
●バスタオル一丁のリュウシさん目撃。	☆★☆（測定不能）
●リュウシさんと夜の空の下で会話。	+4
●他人の青春を手助け。	+3
現在の青春ポイント合計	±0

<藤和エリオ>

●友達が家に遊びに来た。	+1
●一緒にロケット作った。	+1
●一緒にご飯作った。	+1
●一緒にお風呂入った。	+1
●友達が家に泊まった。	+2
●お休みの日に友達と出かけた。	+3
現在の社会復帰ポイント合計	−39

<藤和女々>

●変動イベントとくに無し。	
現在の幸福ポイント合計	+3

Chapter 7 - The Prayer of Tsiolkovsky

"He was brought away by the gods."

That's what Tamura Obaa-chan said twenty eight years ago, when her husband, the Ojii-chan, passed away.

I was only twelve at the time, about to attend middle school the following year.

"It was a cattle mutilation — it must have been."

From the farewell ceremony, the interment till home, Obaa-chan never cried. At the time, her face could still be called 'Oba-chan,' and there were less wrinkles. But she cried till her face was like now… Of course that'd never happened. For us bystander, she looked unmoved.

Even though it's already dusk, she sat in front of the register and ran the store. The grown-ups all said she's traumatized and pitied her. My brother dragged me there, where we sat quietly and listened to Obaa-chan's story.

“The gods are terrible beings. Unlike with other animals, they never take away the organs, but only the souls of people before leaving the body. Jii-san's body was very much pristine.”

After going to sleep, Ojii-chan never woke up. His face was peaceful, even though he wasn't that old.

The cause of death was unknown. Doctors looked over him, but they never found the reason. Perhaps because of that, Obaa-chan thought he was taken by the gods.

“People are gods' toy, as well as guinea pigs — such cruelty.”

Nii-san silently ate his chocolate popsicle; because the stick didn't say 'freebie,' he frowned — at least that's what he wanted us to thin.

Nii-san, who loved Ojii-chan the most, cried in his futon after making sure everyone else went to sleep. We pretended to be asleep, staring as he sobbed. No one joined him.

Obaa-chan looked up to the alien signature personally forged by Objii-chan. It looked just like the signatures of baseball players I've seen on TV. “Plagiarism.” Obaa-chan grumbled.

At then, I didn't know what to say to Obaa-chan.

Since I had no comment, I merely questioned like usual:

“Are gods aliens?”

Obaa-chan squeezed a face full of wrinkles, either crying or laughing:

“Yes, the gods are aliens. That's why so many things are beyond our control.”

On the day that I woke to that dream, I had turned forty. June 6th, an easily memorized birthday.

“Really...” I used to play the sister character pretty well too! Just kidding! “Uwoahh...” Stiff shoulder in the morning already.

To escape the ceiling of reality, I rolled over on the bed. Ughh, can't move. Must be because of the sore on my leg.

“Ow, ow...” In their competition, the sore of the leg seemed worse than the shoulders'. My calves refused to work, currently boycotting; as if to wake me up, the pain and heat rose higher and higher.

“Towel… Uwoah.” Can't raise my right arm. The upper arm ruined the team formation, obstructing all efforts. Who would have known that the capturing activity from two days ago would show its repercussion today?

“But!” My tongue and jaw doesn't hurt when I move. “I'm seriously getting old.” How could you say that!

“E-easy peasy!” One-legged hop, step, and hop. I lightly… crawled up. After a bit of effort, I rolled to the side and got up on the table. Ughh, my waist… Is this the result of bending my back while stalking forward? I'll take the day off. Ah, but I still have to go feed 'them.'

Perhaps exhausted, I seemed to have woken up at a time that's highly inappropriate for functional adults. Glancing at the clock, I learned that it's past eleven.

Slowly taking off my pajama, I pulled open the pink curtain. Clear lights rare during the rain season suffused outside: it was a sunny day. But the rain was sneaking up. In the forty years of my life, I became disliking of the month. Because, it symbolized the time of separation.

Elliot, Ojii-chan, and even Nii-san becoming a June's groom in a different town— they all counted as departure. Then, there's my age. Especially my age. “Heeyah~” I attempted to intimidate someone with a mantis pose. With nothing covering me, this might be too much for any young men.

“It'd be bad for Mako-kun's growth!” Mm, mm~ I stopped, playing as an educator. If Nii-san visits and gave me a 'I picked the wrong person…' it'd be troubling. So, I treat my niece like a cat.

Clothing finished. Makeup… Whatever. Just give it a good smudge before leaving.

I rummaged through the dressing table and found the pain relief patches. I've been using these too much recently, and I think the smell's transferring onto me. I peeled yesterday's off and slapped the new one on my leg. “Kyah~” The cold sensation made me jump; the feeling is almost becoming a high. Is this patch addiction?

“Okay~” I walked around the room. After getting used to it, I noticed it hurt more when I stand still.

Wandering around, I contemplated. Thinking — my essence, and my all.

Today is Meme-chin's birthday~ Laundry or cleaning, I'm not gonna do it~

“Uwoh~” Imagination. Telling Erio my birthday. “H-happy...” I'm not happy at all!

“Uwoh~” Imagination number two. Telling Mako-kun my birthday. “Oh, happy birthday.” I just said I'm not… Gah!

“Uwoh~” Imagination number three. A cake with forty candles. Because of the abundant candles, it looks like a mountain of swords for flower arrangement. When I blew on the candles 'fuu' the flame set Erio's hair on fire. She rolled in a panic. The table that's been knocked over. The turkey and everyone's faces are messed up. What a tragedy!

“Hnng~” I put my hand up against my chin. “Ow!” The scratches on the back of my hand stung still. I'm not too popular with animals other than humans! I've been bullied before in elementary school by a band of rabbits during feeding duty. My brother, on the other hand, could lead a band with chickens, rabbits and ducks behind him. Is it because of some smell on him? For me, the only smell he has is of home.

“Sniff, sniff...” I tried smelling myself. No old people smell yet. Of course not! Rude.

“Okay~!” Let's think about what to do. Cleaning, laundry, cooking, feeding, working, playing with Mako-kun and bugging people. How should I begin? Having so many chores to pick from, I almost cried.

Alright. I extended both arms like wings and bolted outside:

“First, tease Mako-kun!”

Then I'll think about today's stuff.

After harassing Mako-kun like I promised, I hummed my way out of his room but almost slid off the stairs. Both my mental and physical energy had been depleted; my body had reached its maximum. Due to overusing, my back was as if carrying the weight a bicycle front wheel has to endure. Both my leg and waist were in a pinch. This… is a little… I can't. I didn't want to go out today. It is my birthday, so they'll understand. Mm, I'll take the day off.

But I still have to go to the school… Ugh.

I'll just focus on making the rocket in my room. Prototype number 1 is about to be completed.

Since I've decided, I will now take my special leave. I picked up the phone speaker placed next to the entrance. “Beep, beep, beep.” Although the number's already registered, my fingers still keyed in the memorized digits.

I waited for the part-timer cutie who should be working now.

“...Hello? Looking at this number, is it the manager?”

“Yes~ Actually, I feel like there's something happening today, so I can't move.”

“From what I can understand in that sentence, I'm guessing you're just being lazy.”

“Marvelous! So you'll ace the literacy exam, won't you?”

“Mm~ Well, I think it should at least be better than math...”

“About work, just listen to the substitute manager.”

“… The backup being better than the starter is indeed something worth considering.”

“It's just a name; the management right just so happened to have fallen into my laps! Goodbye~!”

Clank, I hung up. Phew~ I was nervous like during middle school whenever I asked for a leave because I wanted to slack off.

Perhaps due to moving constantly, I've acclimated to the sluggishness of my leg. Now my arm's acting up and I can't get it higher than my heart. Yet I tried to hide the sore from the family. Why? Because it felt lame. For humans, appearance is vital! And not just the inside.

Mm~ An easy life without the usage of arms… Oh right! Bingo~ The bulb shone.

I just need to cover myself in futon. Hohoh, learning something from my daughter, I must be gettin— still young! My learning ability is still ripe! Yahoo! That's it!

After seeing Mako-kun and Erio, who were going somewhere, off, I went back to my room where the futon was still inside. Then, with the laundry rope, I tied the futon and crawled inside. Perfect. It's warm. It's hot. And stuffy. Is this a sauna? I can't even see a thing.

No, I saw darkness. The remnant of light also drifted in my eyes. The perfect night was absent in the futon. I tried rolling. Easily done; hence I rolled ceaselessly, keeping the speed low out of fear of running into the wall. I thought more about things. But In the end, I ended up being an adult who had to shoulder these burdens.

"Forty~ Sigh..."

What did Tamura Obaa-chan think when she turned forty?

What did the fifteen-year old Erio see in this murk?

What I saw, was the small-scale replay of memories— a time machine.

☆

The afternoon on the following day, Nii-san and his wife called. Their target, needless to say, was their son Mako-kun. If the phone does ring, I doubt Erio, who has no social sense, would pick up. But if it went off during daytime on the days when no one is home, would she answer? If she does, and it's someone I know, how would I explain? I pondered about the scenarios.

Except for some relatives, I hid the existence of Erio. Adults, after all, have things to consider.

After exchanging with Mako-kun, I had him pass me the phone. A familiar breathing came into my ear. That stubborn forty-two years old even breathes with rules. How does he not suffocate?

"...Hm? Makoto?"

"Helo-ine! Coca-ine!" Let's do some drugs first, then do more!

“Sorry, wrong number. I'll check the number, date and person and call back later.”

“Ah, don't hang up! You're just like Mako-kun, hmph!”

“Listen… Are you giving my son a hard time?”

“You used to only talk with your girlfriend for forever, I've always wanted to beat the crap out of you...”

“You're just the same old, huh… It was your birthday yesterday, right?”

“You remember?”

“Of course.”

“So where's that birthday present?”

“Did you know? June 6th is Brother's day. Shouldn't you be giving me something instead?” (TL notes)

“You jerk, I'm gonna give your wife evidence of you cheating!”

“I'm hanging up.”

“Wait, I have a question for you.”

Timing when Erio left the entrance, I cut to the chase.

“Why do you always take so long to get to your point? What is it?”

“Nii-san, you used to scare women away, but not animals, right?”

“I'm hanging up.” Good, she's gone.

“Tell me the secrets to getting close with animals.”

“How would I know? Go feed them with bones or something.”

“You're so cold! Omigewdness!” (TL Notes: Acchonburike あっちょんぶりけ the catch phrase of Pinoko from Back Jack)

“You're so annoying. You have a pet cat or dog now?”

“I even have a pet wild weasel!”

“That's not even a pet! You just wanted animal therapy to avoid facing dying alone as a city grandma, right?”

“Your adorable son is in my hand right now. If you want him back as a virgin, don't mention my age again.” (TL notes: I thought about changing this, but nah)

"Then are you building a Meme animal kingdom? Ahh~… Secrets, huh. Secrets? Was there any?"

"Nii-san, stop thinking and actually say something."

"You are just so infuriating when you make sense. How about having them open up to you?"

"Where do I open on them?"

"I don't know. Now I'm really lost. Anyway, in simple terms."

"Mm."

"Use your head."

"You're really unfit to be a teacher. Didn't you contributed to national by getting booted off the teacher certification exam?"

"Isn't thinking what you're good at?"

"True, but people al~ways think that I'm not thinking."

"Must be your face."

"Ah, cuz everyone's so mesmerized?"

"… Thinking is one good thing you have — take care of it."

"And the one bad thing you have, Nii-san, is looking down on your sister so much! Make sure you get better with that!"

"I'm hanging up."

"Mm, I'm going to make dinner too. I'm going to fatten your adorable son and make foie gras out of him☆"

"Before you go, let me give you a bit of advice." He sudden lowered his voice and sped up.

"Wh~at?"

"Burn the evidence."

He hung up. Beep, beep, the speaker rung, trying to resonate Nii-san's words.

"I was just kidding." I grinned satisfactorily.

What will the kindling in my hand burn?

But that's another story.

☆

June 8th, one more day passed. 206 days until New Year, and two days after my birthday.

In the morning, while eating a slightly early breakfast, Mako-kun reported that 'Erio said she wants to work.' I mixed the Natto, giving off the appearance that I was still asleep and pretended that I wasn't listening. What I considered wasn't the will that Erio wanted to work with, but how to get her work. As for the carrying out the act itself, I will hand it to Mako-kun for now.

“I'm heading out!” After eating and preparing, I hollered from the entrance. Erio, who had woken up, charged down the stairs to wave at me with a 'have a nice day.' Erio-chan is such a good girl. Complimenting her being like myself yesterday was the right choice~ Eeheehee. Of course I didn't think that — especially the latter part.

Leaving the door, I went into the storage. Faced with my love ride, my calves continued to twitch painfully; but I lightly brushed it off. Saddling onto the bicycle that was new four years ago, I began to pedal slowly.

Ring, ring! I rung on the bell to raise my morale. Ring ring~ Ring ring~ Ring ring~!

“Shut up!” My niece reminded me from the opened window on second floor. “Was that a whip of love?” With that question, he immediately answered with an indifferent 'It's a whip of death!' He sounded just like my brother when he's young.

“I'm heading out~” I looked to the cloudy sky and waved at him. “Yes, yes, please look ahead when you ride.” Mako-kun, too, lightly waved at me. Mm, Mako-kun's 'tsun' is really hard, just like the rice in our house. If he ever becomes 'dere,’ though, he will never let go. How exciting!

With enthusiasm as fuel, I pedaled toward the store I’ve missed for three days. This wasn’t just starting late because I’m on management, but the privilege of being able to come whenever I want. Thus I didn’t sulk, instead rode on with head held high. Like a bird dancing through the air, I almost gracefully flew into the warning sign of a construction site. Now was not the time for silly mistakes!

Penetrating through the workers and students who were on their way to work or school, I took the back alley to the shopping districts. I used to dash through here — and trip. Even though I was the fastest in the group, I was often also the most oblivious. Thanks to the fall, though, I never ran directly into the street and hence the scooters or trucks along the way. I like to think it's a good thing. Actually, the same applies now as well: the bicycle that moved slowly due to my sore leg just avoided running into an orange moped. We will never know what is truly auspicious for them. Every cloud has a silver lining — the same applies for Momo-tarou's story. The grandma cried about 'I don't wanna go do laundry by the river. I don't even wanna move! Your turn, old man. Might as well be naked, too! What do we got to lose at this age? Build a new house next to the river while you're at it!' or something like so to emphasize her laziness; when she unwillingly went to the river, she found the peach. After ten years, the son or grandson born of the peach beat the crap out of the local monster, and they found themselves swimming in gold. What I mean is, the domino of destiny is very intriguing. (TL Notes: Story of Momo-tarou, in which a boy born of a peach flowing down a river defeated the demons on an island with a monkey, pheasant, and dog. His grand/parents are an old couple)

Riding down a short slope, I let my limbs free to enjoy the much anticipated autopilot. The wheels spun successfully today, leading me down the hill like on a slide. It was awesome. Usually, it would swirl around.

After taking the time that's not even excusable for management, but ghost members, I arrived at the store. I parked the bicycles in the corner of the parking lot and went into the back door. I thought about sneaking in, but in the end I walked in with my chest high.

Inside the substitute manager was already preparing to open. Her dexterous movements dazzled, as if encouraging the eyes that followed her to train hard. Substitute manager, Komaki-chan, noticed my presence and bowed lightly. The hair that poured to her shoulder politely drooped with its owner.

"Good morning, manager. It's been three days."

"Yup, it's been three days for me too. It's weird, but I think we're on equal ground!"

"I'm always surprised that your brain doesn't disagree with how biased its usage is."

Her tone seemed simply impressed. "Was that a compliment?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh yay~!"

I tried cheering for it. Koma-chan disapprovingly stared at me as if saying 'amazing.' But it didn't last long. She looked back to the work on hand. Because of the serious and dedicated person that she is, this store managed to survive. Or rather, am I still needed?

"Do you want to be the manager?'

Everything is worth a try, so I asked. "No thanks." Koma-chan denied the promotion without raising a brow.

"The only reason people work hard is because you are the boss."

You're good as a negative example. My brother, who failed many of his job applications, complained to me before.

"Thanks to you, boss, the part timer from last month is also very hardworking."

"Ah, what's that pretty girl's name? Uh… I don't remember at all."

"What was it?"

The girl's overwhelming appearance trivialized her other relevant information.

"That aside… So, I'll keep the title of manager…?"

"Yeah, you have a surprisingly strong presence. That's not too bad, right? Being the mascot manager."

"Heheh, then I will keep it. My ex also told me this: using the metaphor of a village with a hundred people for earth and humans, I think you are worth about five people."

"Those five are definitely not humans."

Koma-chan grinned wryly and began doing something else. She's such a diligent sweetheart, yet she only wrote down 'being sound-minded' in the specialty part of her resume. "Well, I thought it over, but it's seriously the only thing I could think of."

I recall when she said that while scratching her cheek like it was yesterday.

"For someone who skipped work, you look tired. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. But I'm still not going to work."

That's right. Koma-chan exaggeratedly nodded:

"So, a boy came here yesterday and asked a strange hypothetical question. Oh, he was a customer.”

“Mm? What was the question?”

“Hypothetically, if half the human were to be eliminated, are you confident that you will stay in the remaining half? He said it was taken straight from the afterword of a novel.”

“Huh. So what did you tell him?’

“’Thank you, please come again.’ Then I handed over what he bought.”

“Was he impressed with how professional we are?”

“Well, he did force a smile.”

I sat down on a chair, elbows on knees, and observed Koma-chan working. Stare~ Stare. “Jiiii~”

“Please don’t pretend to be a cicada indoor.” (TL Notes: the onomatopoeia for staring in Japanese is じいい)

Inspection complete! I am bored. I stood and knocked the chair away with my butt:

“I’m leaving for a bit~”

“Remember to be back before snack time!”

“Ahaha, I will work hard next month! I’m counting on ya~”

Swinging my handbag, I skipped out of the store. I wasn’t even there for ten minutes.

Jumping onto the unlocked bike that seemed to have predicted the outcome of things, I yelled ‘woohoo~!’ and flew onto the streets. The acceleration wasn’t too bad, but my legs were still too flaccid to keep up with the speed. After stabilizing, the wheels finally lost all their initial speed.

The destination, Tamura Shop. Ring ring, clank clank… Sigh~

☆

“Hah… Hah…” Panting heavily since the middle of the trip, I reached Obaa-chan’s house. When I got off, I stood on my toe for a second; like the sports injury drawn in hot-blooded sports manga, my left calve twitched intensively. Ultimately it was solved with a bit of cold sweat. Mm, good thing I didn’t work before coming here.

I looked back to the place that seemed to be the territory of that seemingly stray dog. I'll find and capture him later.

Insisting on taking on the badly installed door on the right, I finally cracked open a slit that only a slim person like me could fit through after almost shaking the door out of its frame. Though my shoulders were almost stuck, I still forced my way through the opening. As usual, the siren-like doorbell screamed. I raised my head, looking down only after gawking for a bit.

"… Sigh." Despite waiting, Obaa-chan never came to the front. Maybe she couldn't. When her legs aren't doing so good, she can't get up from her bed; even if she managed to crawl out of the room, she could never make it to the bathroom… No matter how many times I suggested to have a care taker, she rejected the notion.

A hint of disappointment dragged my feet. I took off my shoes and entered the residence. As if the unseasonal snow that fell outside sucked all sounds away, the hallway was deathly silent. The air, too, was frigid, filled with the mien of ruin incompatible with human breathes.

I didn't knock, directly pulling open the door in the middle of the hall. The pancake laid in the center bulged slightly. Seeing the tiny movement of breathing, I exhaled.

"I was about to go to the store!"

The usual words that sounded like an excuse made me smile. Obaa-chan's shaky hand appeared on edge of the futon that covered even her head. She seemed to know who the visitor was without looking and said: "Meme, could you put my hand where the glasses are?"

"Yep." How capricious of her, I smilingly slid next to the pillows. I held her hand and wrist — a thin, wrinkled and untoned wrist.

Despite my eyes deteriorating from age, I could still see clearly how emaciated her arm has become. Despite the bangs that draped and blocked my sight, reality was unabatedly displayed in front of me.

"Your hand." She slightly squeezed back on my hand.

"Eh?'

"This is a blindfold riddle, right? Too easy."

She happily guessed on her own, seemingly saying 'don't look down on me!' This granny… Her mouth really doesn't know the meaning of deterioration.

“Correct.” I praised her first before handing the reading glasses to her. I planned on letting go after putting her hand back into the futon. But Obaa-chan continued feeling my hand. For a second I thought she was writing something, but the trace contained no pattern.

“Obaa-chan?”

“Oh, your skin is still pretty smooth. Looks like you’re doing well.”

You could have just looked at my face!

After a while, Obaa-chan let go and put on her glasses, only peeking out from the futon.

Her lowered face grabbed my attention.

“Why did you come here?”

“To see you, Obaa-chan. Good morning.”

“Hmph, the same thing every time. Since when have you become such a boring kid?”

So from Obaa-chan’s view, I’m still a kid? No, wait! I think I’ve actually been branded the nickname of ‘big kid’ by other relatives! According to rumors anyway.

In other words, I’m still young! Woohoo! That’s right, woo!

“I’m already a grown-up.” But I still have to emphasize.

“Idiot. Grown-ups don’t play around at this time.”

“What about Obaa-chan?”

“Can't you tell I'm working at home?”

“Then I’m also running some errands.”

“You sure can run your mouth.”

Obaa-chan criticized me with the uncongenial attitude of both happy and cynical. She rustled both legs out of the futon, looking just like a turtle with front legs retracted.

“I’m going to do laundry, so I’ll take your clothes for you.”

“Fool, didn’t I tell you to go work instead of taking care of people?

“Or do you want to take a shower?”

"I'll do that later. For now… Well, talk."

"Talk…" The chatty Obaa-chan actually handed the job of talking to me.

"My tongue isn't working too well today."

Obaa-chan said so with a poker face. I hope it was just a joke.

"…Oh, the town's animals seem to be disappearing recently."

I shamelessly brought the topic up. "Wha?" Obaa-chan first scowled, and then understandingly looked away:

"I knew that from a week ago."

"And it's still happening! I heard that the stray cats and dogs all disappeared from the town."

"Hmph. Cattle mutilation, huh."

Obaa-chan mumbled amusingly. Those were muffled words difficult to understand.

"Oh, there wasn't any body though!"

"The type that leave the bodies behind is already proven. Mysterious disappearance is always cattle mutilation, has to be."

She hid both legs back into the futon. Obaa-chan's smiling face, like that of a young prankster, was the collective of wrinkles. Not a solid sign of energy on there: like a kite, she was held together only by skin and bones. A kite floating in the daily breeze; if the wind were to pick up — and it doesn't even need to be a gale — it will be torn into pieces, and crash.

"Are you excited?" My eyes hovered in the room as I spoke.

"For what?'

"Cattle Mutilation. The aliens might just be somewhere in this town."

Obaa-chan laughed, like reacting to a kid saying 'I won't sleep till Santa is here!'

"Even if they are, you can't see them!"

"Can you really declare something you've never seen as invisible?" Even though the phrasing is contradictory.

"They must be here right now. I bet you can't see them."

"If I were to rampage through this room, could I wipe them out?" I said so while rolling my sleeve up.

I was actually kind of serious. Perhaps noticing that, Obaa-chan casually pretended to have not hear me:

“It'll be my turn soon.”

“You’ve been saying that since twenty years ago. Is it still true?”

“Hmph… People who have expectation in fools must also be idiots themselves.”

“Uweh?”

“Stop making those disgusting sound. You really haven’t changed; both your face and personality are still off the hinge.”

“Oh yeah. Nii-san always said that I can emit Y*metaran radiation.” (TL Notes: Referring to Yametaran from the Ultraman TV series. Yametaran can emit a radiation that sedate people and make them lazy)

It’s about time for a new topic. I messed my bangs up, sorting out the uncertainly in my voice with a ‘ahh~’

“Obaa-chan.”

“Mm.”

“What did you think of when you turned forty?”

“Forty… Right, your birthday was last week?”

“Eh? Yes.” Before protesting to her about reminding me of my age, I was shocked with how she remembered.

And she even remembered my age.

Obaa-chan’s feet once again crept out of the futon. This time she tiptoed with her tiny feet, advancing slightly. The toes that pressed into the tatami allowed Obaa-chan to move another two centimeters. She planned to leave the room — took me two seconds to realize this.

“Obaa-chan, are you going to the restroom?” I stuck my hand beneath to support her.

“Stu~pid. I was going to give you a present. A snack of your choice on the house.”

“Haha, this brings me back!” Just like old time. Before I turned twelve, was I able to hop joyfully every year?

What’s different now is, I can no longer freely follow Obaa-chan's back.

I put Obaa-chan on my back. I intended to help her anyway.

“I can usually walk; today just happened to be a bad day.” Obaa-chan explained bitterly above my head.

“Yep, I know.” Her voice was raspy. The lips, unstable, felt just like her skins.

“Ah, it’s, uh, muscle sore. I tried to lift a box of cola yesterday, so my waist is sore.”

“What a coincidence! I left work early today because my legs are sore!”

“…You will never be someone who can walk on your own two feet.”

Obaa-chan was reprehensive; my heart only ached.

Even with pained muscle, I did not feel burdened carrying her — Obaa-chan has become so light.

The damp skin festered with pus.

I stopped. Eyes closed. With my tongue as guidance, I deeply, deeply breathed.

I refuse. Someone other than me wanted to use my mouth to say something.

“What? Are you tired? …A certain old man should have told you: where you lack strength and brain, make up with will! Well, not that your will is worth any expectation.”

“Obaa-chan.”

“Don’t tell me to get off, ahahah!” She lost her voice halfway through the laughter.

“I will defeat them.”

“What, your slacking tendencies?”

“No, those are my pets.” Nyahaha~ I glossed over with a laugh and opened my eyes.

Go forward. Then, I thought of something:

“Um… Obaa-chan?”

“Mm?”

"I want to send you a great worker…"

How about letting Erio work here? I think this time, it has to be the best idea.

☆

Weekend, 'June Twelfth' was completed. The rocket was simply and whimsically named after its day of completion. Just as bad as naming the kid Erio after her father Elliot. 'That's fine' I'm currently looking for a man who could say the same. Actually, I don't think I am.

"Yay~ It's done~ Zoom~"

I lifted the newly-born rocket high with both hands and ran around the room. Ahh, being able to relive my youth… Ugh, the storm of complaints for me are as cruel as usual.

No. This is the gap that will excite everybody. Uh, I hope. Pshuu~ ...Mm, since this is a rocket, it should be silent after it reaches space. Though it is a little unromantic, flying with no sound.

"Test flight complete." Next time, I'll use hydro power to test it.

Mako-kun and Erio both stepped out for their ill-prepared job hunt, so the house was devoid of noises and eyes. Since there's no need to be surreptitious, I just walked out with the rocket.

A clear day with patches of clouds; it might rain tonight though. In order to finish before they come back, I strapped the rocket tightly on the bicycle's back rack. As for work, I am of course running 'errands' outside again. I even forgot to put make up on, heheh!

I kicked off on the bicycle, in hope that it would finally rid my calves of sore that's finally let up. My destination: the abandoned farm school. I have to take care of the animals and test the rocket.

Ring, ring, clank, clank… Getting there is one thing, but why do I always ring the bell when I ride? Is this one of those 'everyone's seven habits?' (TL Note: The Japanese idiom無くて七癖, literally mean ' has to have seven habits,' which means 'everyone has his particular habits')

Parking the bicycle inside the school where the field with greenhouses is, I detached the rocket after locking up. "Yahoo~!" I charged forward, rocket in hand, like a surfer toward the beach.

First, break into the school from the door with broken lock. I left the rocket near the hallway's entrance to standby. Stepping barefoot on the lino floor, I felt a moisture that smoothed my feet.

Climbed up to the second floor in cold air like the one in Obaa-chan's house, I arrived at the office and opened its door. They really didn't care about this place, never locking up and all.

Even till now, I still disliked the musty air within. I picked up the animal feed on the table and left the way I came. Then I began the caring of animals that are each living luxuriously in their own room.

Each of them were full of spirit, baring their cute teeth at me unwelcomingly. “Open your mind~!” Gulped down with my brother's advice, I tried talking to them — to no avail. The advices simply lodged in my throat. I wasted more time and energy than needed feeding and cleaning the animals; finally, I moved onto the third floor. Up there was the new dog brought from around Obaa-chan's house. Perhaps he thought the classroom's smell was interesting, the dog sniffed everywhere.

On the way up the stairs, I almost heard Nii-san's laughter: “So this is what you 'thought of?” No, Nii-san, I am still thinking. This is only the process! I answered full of zeal.

Heyo~ I greeted the weasel and the dog, got nibbled by them, and then fed them.

Due to the food's cost exceeding the prediction, the war of attrition had been difficult. It's about time. With the thought in mind, I brought the rocket here today. The aliens are not in space — they hid in places closer to us.

I put the rest of the feed back in the reference room after taking care of all the animals; on the first floor, I scooped up the bottle rocket laying on the green hallway.

I put on my shoes and dashed to the track field. It may be our first time meeting, but I think it's safe to assume that he won’t bite me. I mean, he didn't look like a guy who will try and harm me!

Passing through the walkway between buildings, I moved toward the field where a factory-looking research building was visible. To the left was a dried swimming pool. When this school was still running, we would make up plans to sneak into the pool during night, and, like preparing for a field trip, we'd get super excited.

But in the end, we never did.

“Excuse me~”

In the middle of the field, the man again prepared for rocket launching today. I gregariously greeted him. Wearing a saggy suit that's never had a chance with an iron, he looked about my age… Whoa! This dude looks super young! A college senior? Looking for a first job?! If that were true, then I am, naturally, also a beautiful twenty-two years old college student… Shucks.

The man looked to be about thirty something, at least. On his right ear was a curious accessory; the 'failing-to-look-younger' fashion accessory drew my eyes, but ‘trendy’ is probably the least possible of what people would think of it.

“Whoa!” The rocketeer jumped, stopping his task of pumping the tire inflator. Though with no joy of 'a fellow rocketeer hath come!' he didn't actually appear fearful of a suspicious person — his reaction was comparable to a boy who was approached by a cute girl whom he didn't think he had a chance with.

“Nice meeting you! This is my—“ Ah, I wanted to use the business card. But it's something from thirty nine years old! It might end up as age forgery if I gave it to him. Not 'might,' but 'definitely.' Frustration grew.

“D-did you say 'nice meeting you'?” The rocketeer licked his lips while leaning forward peevishly.

“Yes?”

“No, I mean, you're joking, right?” His eyes blinked left and right.

“About what?”

“You're Meme, I mean— Touwa, right?”

Oops, he's got both first and last name right. An old friend?

“I lived here till middle school, so… Do you remember?”

The man fretfully gestured in a panic, begging recognition from my past. Why does he look like he's about to burst into tears? Does he want me to use a metaphoric bee on him? (TL Notes: Japanese idiom 泣きっつらに蜂. Literally translating to 'run into a bee while crying.' It's similar in meaning to a double whammy)

“Mm...” I placed a finger on my temple, eyes shut as if praying. Now playing memory. '”When was the last we met?”

“At least twenty years ago.”

“Mm, mm.” I reset the time and reminisced.

...Ah, could he be?

“Yamamoto-kun?”

“Wha—! Even with 'kun' added you didn't get a single syllable right!”

“But I probably remember now.”

“Not even my name was included in 'probably…' What exactly did you recall...?” Yamamoto-kun (subject to change) hung his head.

“No, I'm not kidding! I almost remember.”

“Ah, then do you still remember Seiji (星耳)?”

Looking up now, he asked in confirmation.

“Yeah, she's my friend.”

“I thought we were friends too…”

As for Seiji, she's a girl same age as I. She was a friend who moved elsewhere after revealing her pregnancy at highschool.

In the people I knew, she was the smartest who always played the famous detective in detective games.

“I heard she passed away, a long time ago too. Did you know?”

“No, I didn't. I see… She's gone, huh.” I felt surprised, but the acceptance came rather easily, not unlike mismatched wheels spinning.

I thought I shouldn’t have went to her funeral, but sighed in relief at the realization that I didn't have to see her in the coffin.

Whatever the case is, the gods are all morons!

“Since you know Seiji, we must be friends.”

“That's good enough for me. So, put all of your 'almost' together.”

“You are a friend who moved out of town twenty years ago.”

“That’s exactly what I just told you...”

He looked down dejectedly. I hope he doesn't guilt trip me so much next time.

“Did I just not stand out?”

Laughing weakly, he stared with anticipation. Should I just go along and laugh with him? It might end up being the fuse to make this Yamamoto-kun collapse in tears.

“Since when were you back here?”

I put up a nostalgic attitude and questioned. Considerate Meme, activate.

“Just last month. I quit my job and came home.”

Yamamot-kun grinned, tricked into a seemingly normal conversation. As if under the control of habit, he pressed on the inflator, once again pumping air into the bottles.

“Oh, by the way, I'm single.” Okay, so what?

Abruptly, a 'moo' echoed in the field. I turned to search for the origin, but no movements in sight matched the sound.

“An animal?” Still, It’s a little too loud to be them.

“Yeah, can you see the barn there? There’s a cow living there still.”

Yamamoto-kun pointed toward the campus at a direction that's different than where I usually come in. I had no idea. I have, however, seen the runways for horses there.

“Sometimes I feed it when I'm shooting rockets here. I’m actually starting to like it!”

“Yeah, it’s super healing!” Like, the biting and scratching.

“I think it’s the best when you can’t understand each other. Humans interaction is boring because it’s too easy to understand.”

He surmised like he's reached some peak of human relations, nodding contently:

“So what are you doing here? Don't you work?”

“I had little this and that. By the way, I want you to help me with this rocket.”

I came looking for the rocket-shooting weirdo; only, surprisingly, the other person (seemed to) knew me.

“Oh, sure. I'll give ya a hand.”

Yamamoto-kun stuck both hands out to catch it.

“So, why shoot rockets here?”

"Uh, eh… Oh, it's kinda like a hobby! Since I don't work anymore, I have a bit of time… So, uh...Hm."

He put his own rocket on the side and took mine suspiciously:

"I love space, so I shoot these rockets. Yeah, that's it."

"Oh~" As dubious as the motive seemed, I'm not particularly interested anyway, so I let him off.

"Oh yeah. I've never see her, but I heard your daughter is, uh, interested in space?"

"Eh? Yes, she is."

So he even knew about my kid? With what he said about Seiji, he's pretty well-informed for someone who just came back last month.

"What a coincidence, me too."

"You just told me that." Does this Yamamoto think I'm senile?

"Just as I thought, there's a lot of people who like space here, huh."

I don't. Not since the funeral twenty-eight years ago.

"So why are you shooting rockets too, Touwa? Are you interested in m—Uh, I mean, are you interested in it…?"

"It's to defeat them." Overlooking the field, I so declared.

Yamamoto-kun gawked at my forehead. He then patted his waist twice:

"Defeat… who?"

"The aliens."

"...With a bottle rocket?" He looked down at the rocket he held.

"At least it'd do better than get rid of cats, right?" (TL Notes: A popular belief is that plastic bottles filled with water confuse or scare cats)

"These can't even hit airplanes though. Do these aliens ride around on birds?"

Yamamoto-kun smiled wryly with head cocked, but still agreed to help with the launching. His movement was concise, very practiced. He has always been nimble… Has he? Mm, I don't know.

He picked up the hose dragged from the water fountain and injected water into the bottle; he then suddenly pumped air energetically. So there's still running water here even though it's abandoned.

Yamamoto-kun finally finished preparation and kneeled down in front of the launch platform.

“You are… just far enough from the rocket, good.”

“Yep.”

“Then… Look closely, here we go.”

“Yep.”

“Three, two, one…!”

Zero. As I finished counting down inside, the rocket soared.

The shaken-carbonated drink burst, boiling and recoiling.

With the stream pushing, the bottle brought with it dust from the ground and drove toward the sky.

Its path wasn’t straight, wriggling left and right. Perhaps, that was why it never reached its apex.

Compared to Yamamoto-kun’s rockets, which I often peered at, the altitude wasn’t nearly enough.

However…

“It’s way faster than my Salamander (name I just gave for my bike)!”

Being able to see something going up at such a close audience, I was slightly taken aback.

“Ain’t it cool?”

Possibly because of sharing the same excitement with someone else, Yamamoto-kun grinned excessively. Mm, his smile is not quite composed enough though. I think a more collected face is manlier.

“But that rocket wasn’t very stable: the wing sizes were probably too different.”

While feeling joyous, Yamamoto-kun calmly observed me — he probably got used to watching me.

“Hoh, so I need to study a little more!” For the sake of assassinating the aliens.

I retrieved the rocket that, despite being blown around by the wind, finally landed in the campus. Yamamoto-kun, too, followed for some reason, his hands scratching the back of his head:

“Yeah, but someone actually makes better rockets than I do. In this town, I meant.”

“Oh~”

“So, uh… Where’s Elliot?”

“Elliot? He’s not here anymore. I don’t know where he is.” With his family, he moved again.

That reminds me, I’ve never met Elliot’s family. They had never come during parents visit days, and whenever I went to his house, he had always told me they were working or out shopping.

“I’ll make more rockets, so please shoot them for me!”

“Uh, sure, but…”

“Also, I have a favour I need to ask of you.” Good timing. It kind of felt like the guidance of fate.

“Oh, what is it? I can pretty much do anything for you! Yeah, whatever you want, just leave it to me.”

So just why did he fluster? It seemed like he was trying to convey how reliable he is with every word in that phrase. Question marks popped up in my head.

“Psst, psst…” After I requested the dubious Yamamoto-kun, ‘what?’ I met his upset face. “No?” I tried to push him further with a pathetic look.

“Well, uh… Fine! I get it. And it has to soon?”

“Yay~ Thanks! …Then, goodbye!”

“Yeah…”

We both waved vaguely at each other— “Touwa— I mean, Meme-cha—san!”

“Yes?” He hollered strangely as if calling me out for a duel. I turned.

“Uh, so… What I wanna say is… Would you… I mean, before… Or rather… Right, I have to be direct.”

He squirmed around like a girl, his toe drawing circles. Huh, that’s creepy. He’s like a bear pretending to a rabbit.

"…What is it, Yamamoto-kun?"

"I'm not Yamamoto!"

"Eh~ So what is your nam—"

"Marry me!"

" W H A T ? "

My conscious was cut into eight separate lines. My, Meme didn't understand a lick of it.

…Can't I use 'don't understand' to deal with this situation?

Without help of the setting sun, Yamamoto-kun lit up furiously. As for m-me...? How would I know!?

Disregard the cow mooing in the background.

Air circled my throat: I had nothing to say.

June 12th, eleven thirty, AM.

A man whose name I didn't even know proposed to me.

☆

Except for before and after Ojii-chan's funeral, I never went to the store with my brother anymore.

Nii-san made more school friends after he turned fourteen, and he couldn't always come to the store. I've always thought that this was the line between being an elementary and middle school student. At the time I was in sixth grade, and I already had the hazy feeling that it was going to the last year I could keep going to the store. Elliot, too, was thinking the same thing, huh.

Elliot was a foreigner of my age. There was a huge house around where my family's apartment was; he was the boy who lived there, and also almost every girl's crush.

Elliot was a handsome boy; when he had just moved here, no one suspected him of a plastic surjer— surgery. He moved here with his family when he was six: he explained so when we just met. At the time, I thought he was the aliens that Tamura Obaa-chan and Ojii-chan were talking about.

His mysteriously colourless hair capable of reflecting all sorts of hue at different angles shot particles out lavishly — it was as if shining snow hid within. He had lucidly clear (although if it really was transparent, it'd be like a walking human anatomy model), pale skin, as well as defined and elegant features unlike the local's.

It's almost strange that he wasn't displayed in front of a train station like a statue.

Meme-chan, meaning me, fell in love with him on the first sight. I could rightfully say that he was my first love. Luckily, I became his first friend. Though we didn't get any further until a decade later. Interestingly and surprisingly, Elliot's first love didn't come to fruition.

I think the only person, in the past or the future, who could dump Elliot would be Seiji. According to her, Seiji said 'she disliked the part of Elliot that's like an alien' — hearing the comment, Elliot could only give a bitter smile of kindness.

Right after hearing that, I almost transformed into a monster, screaming every night: "Gwaahh! What a waste!" But twenty years since then, even I wonder about what sort of problem he had, considering that we aren't living together now. Well, I think I just couldn't see his flaw when we were young.

The twelve years old me and Elliot walked together to the grocery store. Just walking next to him was enough to make me lose calm. I had hoped that, maybe, if I absorb some of his bangs-particles, I'd become prettier. Heheh, not that I needed it! (Twenty-one year old me, debut!)

A month after Ojii-chan passed away, Obaa-chan restlessly ran her shop. A lot of older customers filled the store the week following Ojii-chan's funeral, but now was just the usual.

Seiji sat outside on the bench flipping through a novel. A bottle of ice water sat next to her, condensation covering it. Elliot happily talked to her while I quietly stared at the scene. As for the current me who's ruminating at the moment, it should just be deep contemplation.

I wonder— would Seiji still be alive, had she accepted Elliot's confession at the time and stayed here? But if that happened, Erio would never have been born, and that'd be problematic— my family, after all, is my main supplier of happiness points.

Entering the store, the siren-like device above the door would scream. I liked the feeling of secret base it created, so I always looked to it. "Welcome." Obaa-chan coldly greeted. "Hello." Erio and I responded together. I noticed, starting from that time, that Obaa-chan already didn't look well. Yet, I never brought it up with anyone else.

Elliot headed first to the drinks, while I the snack shelf. Since I promised dad that I'd only buy one snack a day, I deliberated. Spinning around the shelves, I nudged other people away. Eventually I casually made it to Elliot's side to eave drop on him, and, with some hope, join the conversation. Whenever I had the chance, I would always sneeeeak up next to Elliot.

He and a few other boys stood in front of the glass door of the fridge, pulling on each other while chatting.

“We make fireworks around here. Oh~ Well, meaning we sell fireworks! You've seen my dad's fireworks at last year's festival, right Elliot?”

“Yeah, I did.” Elliot nodded softly. And then, another boy followed:

“My parents sell flowers, especially for funeral stuff. Like when someone's grandpa died, I send flowers to them… Uh, that sounded bad.” Yep, it sure did!

Elliot replied with a confused smile. On the other hand, I noticed how both topics talked about flowers. (TL Notes: Firework 花火 literally translates to flower-fire)

It's then Elliot's turn to say what his family does, but he grinned, calling it a secret. “I don't really know either~” Once again he delivered smoothly, but it seemed like an excuse. Every time the topic of family is mentioned, Elliot would always gloss over like that. At times like such, even his distinctive presence would dissipate.

But forget about that; with Elliot as the center, the boys prattled. I could never butt in.

Ugh, it's one thing that boys are getting along, but I remember being rather infuriated. Though vexed, I still went back to pick my snack. Vent with sweets! I actually had no clue what that meant at the time, but eating delicious snack would always calm me down.

When I couldn't decide, I would usually pick smaller snacks. I don't remember the name, but I'd pick the pea-sized square candies. They were green or pink, and the texture was like mochi or gum while tasting sweet. I loved eating the little squares with the toothpick that came inside. (TL Notes: Kozakura mochi. Little square wagashi packaged like tablets)

With the plastic package in hand, I ran next to Obaa-chan. “I want this~” I handed it to her. “Alright, alright.” Obaa-chan then tapped on the register.

“Mm? What happened to your hand?”

Obaa-chan tilted her head questioningly after seeing my right hand. “Mm~?” I followed her to my finger tip. “Ah~” I remembered: “It was a cat. The grey one Nii-san brought home. It scratched me when I tried to touch it~”

“Hoh~ Again? Animals just hate you, don't they?”

“I know~ It's kinda funny.”

“I noticed that you always buy the same thing. Have you grown to be an idiot who likes to remember only one thing?”

“Eh~ I'm not an idiot. I got a hundred on a quiz last time.”

I paid before taking off my shoes and climbing next to Obaa-chan. She didn't say anything, only silently letting me sit there. Her wrinkled hands roughly rubbed my head:

“No, you are. All you need is to look at your parents' faces.”

“You're just being mean~” I opened the package casually sealed by a rubber band.

“Smart kids will never come here.”

As if deprecating herself, Obaa-chan spoke with a twisted smile:

“Kids come here because they're stupid— once they grew smart, they stopped coming. As for fools like Ojii-chan who never grew up, they inherit this kind of store. It's my parents' stores, so he could have just left it to close.”

“Aww!” I sensed that it sounded just like Nii-san; my spirit dampened: “I'll keep coming here! Even when I grow up, I'll still al~ways come.”

“Stupid. You have to work properly when you grow up… Well, it's my turn soon.”

“Turn? Do you want one too?” I skewered a piece and passed it to Obaa-chan's mouth.

'Don't want it' Obaa-chan brushed me off, and as if giving up, she mumbled:

“Cattle mutilation.”

A tiny explosion expanded in my eyes. I recalled— they were the words Obaa-chan mouthed after Ojii-chan's funeral. She had yet to cease her self-mocking tone:

“Your Ojii-chan and I are the same age. Following that order, shouldn't it be my turn soon?”

“Ehh~ But you can't!”

I pushed against Obaa-chan's hand, waving my hands raucously; the snacks fell everywhere.

“What do you want me to do…? Gods use alien technologies to hide themselves, so we can't see them; hence there is nothing I can do.”

Obaa-chan's words softened; rather than from kindness, it was more dejection.

Contrastingly, my emotion hopped from all sorts of places. I looked up, seeing the mustard-coloured face that lacked the circulation of health.

“Uwah, wuu~ I-I will take care of that cat-whatchamacallit!”

“Hoh~ How?”

Obaa-chan smiled maliciously as if asking a landmine-question.

My tiny brain couldn't think of anything, so I could only moan 'wu~wu~' and conclude. “I donno!” Due to brain cells being squashed, I gave up on thinking.

“See~ You are stupid.”

“But, I don't wanna Obaa-chan to be gone~ I~ don't~ wanna~!”

“Well thank you! Just stop kicking the floor, you're going to break it!”

Obaa-chan thanked hastily and patted my head. It wasn't my problem, but I almost cried. The imagination filled me with more loss than Ojii-chan's funeral.

“Mm, if you really want to do something, then think well. Think so well that even the toilet seats would move first. Even an idiot could come up with something after contemplating. Grandpa was also an idiot, but he'd always come up with some weird idea after two days of thinking.”

“...Wuu~”

“Why not just defeat them?”

The usually tranquil and calm voice interjected. It was Elliot.

Putting a bottled drink worth of coin on the register, he smiled at Obaa-chan and me.

Faced with the same smile, Obaa-chan hmphed, while my heart raced.

As though to confirm, Elliot said it again.

'Why not just defeat them?'

Maintaining that warm expression, he stated the simplest solution.

Then Elliot put the cola bottle next to his lips and chugged down.

Thinking about these things, I passed out in the bath.

A praposal, I mean, proposal. I escaped home and hid in the bathroom's tub. Why? I don't know why I hid in the tub. I was shaken, and before I realized it, I'm already viva non-non-ing in the hot water. (TL Notes: A reference to the song いい湯だな, nice hot water, of Japanese band 'The Drifters.' Viva non-non is chanted between verses)

I left the bathroom, boiled. Boiled~ spoiled~ spoiled. I lied down wearing nothing and crawled on the floor, enjoying the chilling sensation. It felt great on my burning skin, but the coolness left immediately, so I dragged slithered. Gecko crawl~ go back the way I came after reaching the entrance. The distance drew on and on~ Returning to the changing room, I stayed on the floor and put on my underwear and pajama.

“Gotta get up, gotta get up… Whoa~” Blinded by the eye patch that was my own hair, I finally stood up with my left eye covered. My soles singed the floor; my skin bloated by the water, feet shambling as if five or six bees were kept within. With my head rubbing against the wall, I dove into the living room. Wham~ While sliding inside, the tip of my nose burnt from the friction. Uh, my nose would be even flatter.

Out of such fear, I lifted only my head up with chin on the floor, mimicking Obaa-chan to propel myself forward with only my toes. Squiggle~ Having a longer-than-predicted reach is good, but my boobs hurt more than I had thought. Ow… Obaa-chan is flat as a— wait, what am I thinking?

Ultimately I crawled on my knees, grabbed the remote sitting on the table and collapsed on the floor again. Arm forward, press the button. 'Beep!' On a certain replayed film, a certain someone is about to marry a certain someone. Turn it off. Back on again, and change the channel. The show was about making a low-calorie fried pork-steak. I gawked at the golden hue of the meat; the worm in my stomach growled like a new species of animals.

“Ughh, I don't wanna cook.” As an emergency measure, I switched the channel. On the screen now was a teaching program; I joined the speech practice midway. “A~ B ~ C~ D~” Which reminds me: Elliot didn't speak anything besides Japanese, but his accent was still weird. No one knew where he came from.

"...Ugh~"

I dragged myself to open the cabinet. A moist wave of dust rose; the tapes were still stacked there. We don't have a machine for DVD in this house, so the tape will have to do the spinning.

Shoving the tape into the player, I picked up the VHS remote on top of the TV. "It's been a while!" I almost didn't even remember how to use it. After a few random clicks, the tape played successfully. I jellied again; affected by the still-present heat, my guts refused to settle. Even lying on the floor was a kind of hell.

The movie that we've only seen as children at the movie theater began playing on screen. I, Elliot, Seiji, and few others biked to see the movie. My brother was going to join us, but he got sick and stayed in our apartment. And when the film was broadcasted on TV, the entire family watched it together. I'll save this topic for another time.

Left eye glued to the floor's weavings, I watched the screen change with only my right. Yet whatever entered my brain was picture and darkness — my left eye saw nothing it was supposed to.

Please forgive me! I was kidding when I said I'm super popular! And now it's actually happening. Uhh… Hnng… So, is this what Yamamoto-kun said?

"Marry me!"

I regurgitated the sickening consonants. I almost went mad from the embarrassment:

"...Are you kidding me?"

Thinking back, this was my first time proposed to. Of course I'm freaking out! How could I not be!

"Even if it's by some guy I don't know… Well, I probably knew him?" Not that I remember a thing.

How nerve wrecking! Should I just reject him? But more fundamentally, do I plan on getting married now? With whom? Yamamoto-kun? Elliot? No, not Elliot; I don't even know where he is. More importantly, I don't think it'd work out. Elliot is an abnormally exquisite art: he has a proper location, a fitting place to exist and a position right for him. In whatever case, that place is not here. Still, for me to just welcome Yamamoto-kun with open arms is just as impossible.

After all, I've only wanted to live with no one else but Erio. I don't have the confidence to let someone else in. As for Mako-kun, he's just like my kid. To treat an outsider like family — I am abnormally hesitant toward it. Wu~ My stomach is starting to hurt from the circular thinking.

Um… I was wondering about whether my happiness points are going up or down, right?

But I still have to think. Because, it is how I walked here all the way.

“...Sigh.”

What should I have done instead when Erio escaped into the futon?

Perhaps I should have told her: 'think.' Not just once, but as many times as I could.

If I had taught her well, she might still be in school now.

I've always lived in regret: even when I achieved something, I could never feel perfectly happy.

“...Meow~” I tried doing a duet with the cat on screen.

I can only hope to resolve the situation now without any remorse.

After a while, Mako-kun and Erio returned as my brain reached boiling point.

'Go find Obaa-chan!' I licked his knees after instructing so, finally regaining my spirit.

It's strange, but Mako-kun always motivates me!

...If I were to say that, I wonder if he'll let bygones be bygones?

The following week consisted of repeating days with the standard of June this year.

One day, I snuck into Tamura Shop to see how Erio's doing at work. Even though no one came on the first day, she's still freaking out. The moment I walked in, she bolted out frantically and tripped. Her nose started bleeding, so I wiped the blood away and stuffed her nose with a tissue paper.

What a worrisome child! That is, however, what made her so adorable.

After that happened, Erio prohibited me from coming into the store.

'Absolutely… no!'

'I'm… going back to… society!' She violently shook her head while saying 'don't come in… Don't come in… You can't!' Forming a barrier with her arms.

I thought about breaking this blockade by hugging it tightly, but this was no game for Erio. Hence, I decided to hold myself back — can't always try to interlope.

Even though the promise made it hard for me to see Obaa-chan, perhaps it is better this way before the preparation on this side is finished.

But knowing that Mako-kun could enter freely, I just had to bully them that night ☆

And, despite this being an information I happened upon on the following day, I heard that that Yamamoto-kun was purchasing a large amount of coke and visiting the store at a rather frequent rate. Knowing that before running into him was definitely helpful. So that, along with the hope for Erio, I decided to watch the store when nobody noticed. And I could also prepare for Yamamoto-kun meanwhile — two birds with one stone!

Then came the night when I shut myself in a room to make bottle rockets. Following Yamamoto-kun's advice, I adjusted the tail fins. To make the four wings equal in size, I had to trim carefully. Staplers, scissors; box cutter, double-sided tapes: the tools scattered on my desk were all purchased from Obaa-chan's store long ago. Do I cherish my things? Or maybe I just never used them?

Back when Erio was still in grade school, we made many rockets together; so without referring back to an instruction, my fingers did most of the steps. We also had some unused nozzles and PE rocket heads put away in the storage, so I didn't have to spend money. My Eri-chan has always been interested in flying objects since she wore diapers — she's quite full of wings and dreams! Uh, to a point where her brain was floating around for a while. Please do excuse her for that!

The most annoying part of making rockets had to be finding bottles. Even if you need only five bottles, our little Mako-kun doesn't like carbonated drinks: he wouldn't do his mission like a good little fairy if I were to leave those in the fridge.

How did Yamamoto-kun get his bottles? I didn't want to come across as a jerk, either, by having him test fire; so I've never progressed beyond making the rockets.

For the remaining time, I would occasionally show up to work at my own store. Yep, perfect. Just like summer vacation's daily schedule, it's never to be followed. I recall back in elementary, a classmate wrote 'stayin' alive' for all twenty four hours on his daily schedule. After turning that in, he got a detention and was scolded by the teacher. We didn't know till later that the kid was actually terminally ill and didn't have many days left; the teacher showed up at his door smeared with tears. The kid died… I think on the June the year after that. Everyone in class showed up for his funeral, so I remember. Ah, June again? Indeed the month of separation.

And so I stood near the Tamura Store on the Saturday of the following week as the sentimental Meme-san. For some reason, there were a lot of customers gathering today. I noticed two dubious shadows. A girl about Erio's age, and a middle-aged man living out his youth.

Including me, the three people hid in the shades to watch the Tamura Shop. Why did so many UFO show up in our peaceful town? Did someone with a human repellant drive these people out?

Just as the 19th of June sent an invitation to the rain, I blew air at the young girl's neck. It's more appropriate than with Yamamoto-kun, right? Under my goose bump-inducing breath, her entire person jumped with an amazing reaction. 'Keewah! She seemed completely oblivious of my presence.

The girl's boots gave, almost sending her butt-first into the puddle; I reached forward and helped her up. Her wrist pulsated quickly, and her eyebrows too blinked intensely.

I poked her soft cheeks — it was a very cute girl. I recognize her from somewhere. Was she Erio's friend? She didn't seem to know me though.

After introducing myself, I casually handed the cola I'd been sipping on to the girl. It would be a waste not to. Heheh, a successful transfer. I was about done with the taste of cola anyway. I don't like carbonated drink that much, because Meme was raised properly: I drank only barely tea when we lived in the apartment.

Without further ado, I asked the girl to tell me where Yamamoto-kun was while prattling. I told her that he was actually my fan, but perhaps he now wanted to observe Erio. Yamamoto-kun knew I have a daughter, so could he plan on getting on her good side? Is this slyness, or shamelessness? What on earth did he learn after leaving town?

After contemplating about the enigma of Smooth-skinned sensei, she yelped, 'ah!' with her pupil contracting. The girl looked toward the store as if she'd discovered something. To avoid Yamamoto-kun I hid myself more completely than she did, so I could not see the situation behind the concrete wall.

"Then, I must get going!" The girl bolted off after few stretches. "Bye~" I saw her off; Yamamoto-kun's silhouette replaced her.

"Uwah..." The orchestra of rain dripping off the yellow umbrella played out above my head.

Should I try talking to him to get friendly? No~no. Just thinking about that is going to make me collapse. On the embarrassment number scale, it's about 80. Usually I have about 3. Now, imagine using a decagon screwdriver on a tri-point screw. What I mean is, the number will break the roof.

And just standing around to talk is weird. Problem is, if I was invited to a cup of tea, I will be totally suspicious. Definitely. For the pure Meme-chan, she has no immunity to that kind of open relationship. I haven't even been vaccinated… Eh? The script? I'm supposed to say 'JK' here? Oh, just leave me alone, Manus Dei~. (TL Notes: Original text was 'the hand of god.' Manus Dei means the same thing in Latin)

"Wuu… Mmm~" Out of confusion, I started dancing. The rain poured and poured~

I've slightly regained composure. Thinking is vital, but there's only action after this point.

Yamamoto-kun looked around under his umbrella, appearing to be searching for something far away. Probably me. If it were Erio, he would have already entered the store.

I looked away from him. I'll give up on today's monitoring.

On the way home I found a cat. After abducting it into the school, I decided to go home.

A corner of my heart hoped to never see Yamamoto-kun again in town.

Rather than tea buddies, we were more like rocket comrades.

And we will duel on the field! Yes!

"...Hnm?"

Something seemed off, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

“Is it age?” I mumbled, as if tracing the parts I don't want to admit with the tip of the words.

I saw something in the grey sky — the scene of important things entering the morgue.

☆

On the day twenty-eight years ago that led to everything today.

Like divulging the secret of a magic, Elliot smilingly spoke.

To defeat what you can't see is actually very easy!

It was a smile that would look snide on others, but artistic only on Elliot.

“Defeat? How?”

I pulled my head away from Obaa-chan's palm and leaned forward. Though my hand crushed the green snack I dropped, the light pain was brushed aside when I questioned Elliot.

Obaa-chan looked at me in boredom, silent.

Elliot sipped the cola and asserted calmly.

The only way to touch which you can’t, is through faith.

'Face?' I shut myself up before saying a thing.

Ritual and prayers are needed to show faith.

Elliot claimed so maturely — the only time he seemed older than Nii-san.

“Ritual?”

Hearing the word only made me think of people in purple robes with only their eyes flashing red, hiding in dim room filled with incense, singing and dancing.

And prayer reminded me of the poor girl in W*rld Masterpiece Theater who had to sleep in the staple, but would never forget to pray every morning.

“Religion?”

So I asked, and he laughed. “I don't really understand either,” he shrugged: “I'm just observing to see if the things I see are really worth believing.”

With a grin pushing up his eyes, he stared. I felt like I was being devoured.

Goose bumps split the camouflage of skin, revealing the true nature. But of what? Of his — Elliot's eyes.

He has a gentle face, but all that contoured his features were straight lines. The natural existence of curvature was absent.

Obaa-chan's palm touched my frozen back and pushed lightly:

“More importantly, pick up your mess. Or you better pay up.”

“Aye, aye.” I imitated the cartoon character on TV and received a smack on the head.

Picking up the snack on the floor, I tossed them into my mouth.

“Don't eat off the ground, stupid!”

Pah! Another slap. “Owwu!” Though it didn't hurt, I still grabbed my head.

“Go wash them afterward. It's dirty here.”

“But this is your house, Obaa-chan!”

“Exactly.”

A flick on my forehead, but this time the nail hurt me.

“Obaa-chan, cut your nails!”

“Hmph, try again when you're older than I am.”

“How~!”

Seeing the exchange, Elliot beamed again. Seeing his squinting smile, my heart took the initiative to practice aerobics. “Hah, hah...” My chest hurt! It's more of an explosion than a jolt, like receiving a ball from a major league softball player.

“Oi, don't go all colourful here.”

“I-I'm always colourful!” (TL Notes: Original text indicated a Japanese proverb/idiom regarding first love, which apparently is synonymous with colouring. I could not find it as of yet)

I put the food back into its box and ran inside. Submerging the snack in water, I also rubbed and cooled my hand. “Phew~” I hate the feeling of heat; I like winter more than summer. At least, the cold I can stand.

And at the worst, I just have to roll around in a futon.

After cleaning up and drying off, I returned to Obaa-chan. “Oi, it's dripping." The sharp-eyed Obaa-chan reminded me, but I still carelessly sat next to her while and ate away happily.

Nom, nom… After the wash, they tasted like gum with no flavour. It would seem that this kind of food only has flavouring on the outside!

"….."

Even with the snack's flavour faded, the aftertaste of Elliot's statement lingered.

To touch what you can't see, you need faith. To show that faith, you need 'ritual and prayer.'

☆

I flipped the calendar; the number '25' shot into view.

Today was the twenty-fifth of June, the prep day of the ritual. It will be extremely busy… Well, not really.

How about treating the headache first? So I could keep my head up at the sky tomorrow.

"...But~ first~" I spun around in the living room, operating the remote.

First, set the channel onto the news program that we hardly watch. "Woosh~" As I began to feel the limit of my cochlea, and my lively twirl became 'Urwa, m-my head…' the forecast segment began. Toyed by my unruly eyes, I barely safe-landed in front of the TV screen. I rolled onto the ground and watched it with ringing in my ears.

Tomorrow's forecast was cloudy with a chance of sunshine. I was glad that it wasn't inverted. There's still a 30 percent chance of raining, but considering the season, this was more than acceptable. "Alright~' I raised my arm weakly. "… I'll stay like this for now." Like a middle schooler set to stay home, I excused myself. I mean, I am going to see the person who proposed to me!

Mumble, mumble. Tumble, tumble. Trim my nails, tidy some things up, clean the window's edge already covered with dust. In about half an hour, I finally gave up on procrastinating. Pinched under my arms was the now yellow June 21st. It won't stop sounding like the number of a magazine. Due to a botched paint job, June 17th took the day off.

Just like last time, I rode, with the rocket behind me, on my favourite bike. Straddling onto the bicycle also known as 'ケッタ (ketta)' in the country side, I pedaled standing, heading toward the road decorated by the grey cloud that couldn't make up its mind.

The residential is located between the old town and the city that spread out like a squashed jellyfish; there are rarely people in the morning. Since it's a weekday, the buzzing of children was also kept in their schools, so the only ones barking were the dogs. A chocolate-coloured dog lives here, and every time when someone passes in front of the window it would reacted energetically. It's been barking since it was a pup — maybe that's his mission in life.

With no traffic on the road, I cut into the longer, straight road to test out my highest speed. I pumped strength into the thigh that grew stronger after the sore. Woosh~ the sight around stretched out. Wind resistance went from weak to medium.

My heart accelerated like when I first met Elliot.

Naturally, no matter how many turns the wheels had in store, I will never fly in the sky. The bicycle proceeded on the earth, finally delivering me to the house of animals and rockets.

“Thanks!” I rubbed the handles, showing my gratitude to its ten years of service. Is filling the tires next time enough for payment? I'll also throw in waxing for free.

After loosening the rope on the rocket, I lifted my arm to the highest point. I recalled running around in the room with a model airplane. Compare to then, would this rocket reach closer to the sky? Toward the sky, cloud and sun that seem touchable by hand.

Alright, here we go.

“Hi~ Shugoro.” (TL Notes: Yamamoto Shugoro 山本周五郎 is a Japanese novelist during the Showa Period)

Before reacting to me, he has to first be terrified. He's even shaking. And I thought I wasn't a furtive person. During his youth, though, Yamamoto-kun probably didn’t stand out much.

“That Yamamoto…? I mean, isn't it time to ditch 'Yamamoto'?”

“Really?” Back back back, I backed away.

“Not literally! Fine, I'll be Yamamoto… So please, stop running away.”

“Really?” Shuffle shuffle shuffle, I shuffled forward again.

Me and Yamamoto-kun stared at each other. I felt I couldn't be frank, though. So, the solution is to dance around the issue? Mm… Mm!

“Um… Uh, You, uh, here to shoot a rocket?”

He pointed at the rocket I held in my chest; his eyes darted about.

Just like a prey about to be devoured.

“Yeah. Also to turn you down.”

“Huh??”

Seeing the other side lose it, I managed to compose myself. How strange! It's like a scale.

More importantly, isn't the best time to tease him when he's flustered? We can't both be ruffled at the same time.

“Ah, I mean… What I said before… Not that I want you to just forget about it, but I was a little exited, or sudden… But, uh, sorry.”

“Well~ I wasn't really disgusted or anything. But I have to turn you down.”

Yamamoto-kun's eyes attempted to steal the base, but I picked him off to keep his eyes away.

“Turn me down, but— wait. Let me explain everything first!” Panic!

“Absolutely, please do so. But I will still have to refuse the offer.” Smile!

Though cowered, Yamamoto-kun still dropped the hose and displayed a truthfully bashful attitude. His legs, arms and head were bouncing around like a toy tangled by a spring.

“I've liked you since we were little.”

“Thank you.” That’s embarrassing! Especially when others mention old things!

“Well, uh… That's it.”

He picked up the hose, resignedly poured water around the field:

“After I quit my job and came back, I didn't have anything to do. Then I saw you riding by the train station. You looked so happy, like when you're little, riding like that. My eyes and, well… heart, was taken away by you. That's all.”

If you might lose to the embarrassment, just don't say embarrassing words!

He said I looked happy, possibly because my face seems happy all the time. At least I think that's why.

I'm almost always thinking about food when I ride to take my mind off the fatigue though.

“After coming back, the only friend I still have left here is just you, Touwa. That might be one of the reasons too… Aside from affection, I also wanted to interact with people.”

“…...” Not knowing what to say, I kept silent with an equivocal smile.

“Oh, right… What if it wasn't me — it could even be Elliot — do you plan on marrying anyone else?”

“No, I don't. Absolutely not.”

I tried my best to refute lightly; a hint of dejection appeared below Yamamoto-kun's eyes.

“Shame. You're still… um… so pretty.”

“Heheheh, I'm still young, so I don't wanna be tied down.”

“Elliot was the only thing you thought of when you're little though.”

“Let’s set the jokes aside.”

“Hm.”

“Me, my daughter, and my niece living together: that's plenty for me. Loving someone, or having someone love me… Well, frankly, I get my happiness points every day from my family. And in that family, a husband is not needed now.”

Mako-kun and I will be Erio's guardian. I'm surprised with how agreeable this turned out to be:

“I never married Elliot either, so I guess I will stay single forever.”

“I see… Hm.”

He directed the tube skyward, making a rainbow of water.

Yamamoto-kun smiled lightly as if all four corners of his emotion had been held down:

“I understand. I guess I'm just a little carried away since it's been so long since we spoke.”

“Making a decision for being 'a little carried away,' you sure have learned how to be reckless!”

“I'm usually mellower, being forty and all. I don't even have the energy to hop around anyway. Does that make sense?” Well, I almost hop around in home every day! Does that mean I'm actually not forty yet?

After rounding up… I’m about zero. In other words, me, Mako-kun and Erio are the same age. Despite being her mom, we're classmates — actually, I don't want any sci-fi gimmick, so if that were to happen, a lot of things would probably collapse.

Well, if I did say something like that, Mako-kun would probably give me the look. Oh boy~

“You're grown to be quite a sensible adult, Yamamoto-kun.”

“Well, I haven't quite given up yet, to be honest.”

“Unfortunately, I'm an extinct volcano.”

“How about we start as friends first?”

“Eh? I thought we are already friends?”

I played dumb. “That's… right.” Yamamoto-kun widened his eyes deliberately.

“You wanna shoot the rocket, right? Let me see it.”

“Thanks. Tomorrow is the official launch; I just want to do a last check-up.”

“Official launch?” Despite his eyes drifting askance, Yamamoto-kun still took the rocket.

“I told you, didn't I? I want to defeat the aliens.”

“With a PE rocket tip?”

“I want your help. After all, hadn't Tamura Obaa-chan taken care of you before?”

“I suppose so. I mean, I only met you after I started going to the store.”

Maybe he didn't realize his own words, but Yamamoto-kun's skin did not activate the production of red ginger.

“You want me to help, but specifically how? Shoot rockets?”

He poured water into the bottle through a funnel while asking with a disinteresting and professional tone.

“You know it.” I told him when and where.

“Okay. That’s you want me to help with?”

“Correct. How's it looking?”

“It's done. I did my best since you asked me to do it.”

Once again he casually and unabatedly stabbed the soft part of others' heart. Ugh, I could feel the goosebumps.

Yamamoto-kun looked away from the rocket; after scanning around, he shot me a glance:

“So, your daughter is really tall.”

“Eh?”

“I think she's at least 180, right? Is what you're feeding her that good?”

Yamamoto-kun mentioned 'daughter,' hoping for the mother me to respond… Hmn?

I crossed my arms, imagining and putting the model of Erio together. Paint gun… Okay, done. Now, let's think about this.

“Touwa, what's the matter?” I ignored Yamamoto-kun, the source of the question.

Just what is he talking about? Where do you find 180 on Erio…? Three sizes? No matter where, if it were shoved into this model, the shape is still too weird. Is it the sum of a number? If Yamamoto-kun knows how much her three-sizes adds up to, it's time to call the Popo.

Then, her IQ? Power level? Frequency? Whatever the correct answer is, my daughter stands out too much!

Well… About time to give up on escaping reality. Yamamoto-kun already said it from the start. Height. Over 180cm. Hence, the next question is 'who is he talking about?' The question crash landed… Oh? There's someone I knew that fit.

Around the same age as my daughter, and a height that fit that description. I think there's only one person like that in this town.

“Yamamoto-kun.”

“Yes, yes, I am Yamamoto, because that's my nickname. What is it?”

“You're mistaken.”

“Wha?” His hand twisted, a large amount of water poured onto the dirt.

“She's not my daughter.”

My Eri-chan isn't the white dango, but the futon girl!

Yamamoto-kun's eyes shrunk into a dot. Time passed while he connected the line:

“Eh… hah? That's her, right? The weirdly-dressed girl working at the Wagashi store?”

“That's the hardworking employee in my store.”

“But I've heard that your daughter was the girl that walked around town with some weird outfit.” Yep, you're correct!

“That part was indeed true — till this April.”

“April?”

“You said you came back during June, right? Then you probably missed futon Erio.”

“R-really? That wasn't her?”

“Yep.”

“…Well, I thought about how her height was never mentioned… Usually that's what people point out first. I thought something was off, since you don't look alike.”

Mm, indeed we don't. Maekawa-chan told me that she doesn't resemble her parents either. Well, not my business.

“That's quite presumptuous of you.”

“Yeah… But can you really blame me? If a girl walking around in Mr. Sat*rn's outfit isn't weird, I must be living my forty years of life backward!”

Yamamoto, what on earth did you think my daughter was?

“So your kid… What does she dress up like now?”

“Super normal and cute clothes! My daughter is quite dynamic!” Not referring to her evolution.

I'm so thankful of Mako-kun! I'm going to give him a peck on the cheek as thanks next time.

“… I was shooting rockets, hoping that your daughter would see them.”

Yamamoto-kun sighed, revealing the hope he had placed on the bottle rockets:

“I picked this place because I needed an open area where she could see the rockets from the front of that Wagashi store.”

“I see. Why?”

“I thought she's interested in space, so maybe that'll get her attention.”

“Ah, was that also part of the plan to find me?” Right after saying so, I gradually felt ashamed. Were my feelings numbed?

“Yes.”

“The label on your ear, too?”

“I thought she might like the whole cattle mutilation thing. Plus there's a cow around here.”

“I see. By the way, I like cow tongue.”

“She's a dairy cow...”

With the tube slipping from his hand, Yamamoto-kun barely answered my question, appearing as if he'd collapse any second.

Who would have known that the effect of Mako-kun taking off Erio's futon would be so far-reaching? That's the second volume for ya: you have to have the first to… Huh, what am I saying?

“So what? We united again thanks to the rockets!”

“I guess.”

Perhaps due to shock, Yamamoto-kun didn't react too strongly to my rare and embarrassing lines. He will definitively feel it after we split, when he's sitting in his house tub.

“So those leftover rockets, are they all for nothing?”

Yamamoto-kun stared at the warehouse-like building at the corner of the field.

“There's a pile of rockets there. I wanted to have an excuse as well as to get to know her; I asked that someone you mentioned to make a bunch of rockets. I even paid for the things… I guess it’s a graveyard at this point.”

“…...”

A bunch of rockets… Isn't that just what I need?

Like an army of locusts.

Like pigeons covering the sky.

Rituals must be carried out with fanfare and drums.

The signals Elliot sent me from who-knows-when shook my head; the muscles on my cheeks relaxed:

“Yamamoto-kun.”

“Hah? Ah yes, I am Yamamoto. Ahahaha...” It's not the time to give up!

Can't be helped. I lowered the spider's string for him:

“Aren't there a lot of platforms for launching rockets left?” (TL Notes: The Spider's Thread is a short story about Buddha letting a spider's string down into the depth of hell to attempt to rescue a single sinner. In the end, because of the sinner's selfishness, the string broke and he remained in hell)

“Wha? Hm, I did bought an entire set… My wallet's still aching.”

“Is it? To me, you have to be the best domino.”

I smiled at the old friend who bolstered my destiny.

Not just his face, Yamamoto-kun turned bright neck from his neck up. I decided I'll keep proud of my good looks. Awesome! The goal is now a gap-moe in ten years!

☆

On that night, the welcome at the entrance was about six times as rowdy as usual.

“Welcome home.” Four girls and boy filed down from second floor and greeted me in a row. Seeing Erio standing with girls her age, Meme teared up… Like this?

“You're Mako-kun's friends...” As my mouth opened, surprise shut it… Um?

“Ah!” I met eyes with the girl to the leftmost. Both of us realized we have met before.

Or rather, I know all four of them.

“Smooth-skinned sensei.”

“Smooth-skinned sensei?”

"S-smooth-skinned sensei."

"……"

Starting from the left, it's the soft-cheeked girl, the giant mistaken as my daughter; the daughter desperately trying to figure out what's going on, and the silent niece with a grim face. Everyone's eyes were askance on the niece.

"Cousin, are you not saying it?" Erio casually asked Mako-kun. Well done, Erio, just nonchalantly force Mako-kun to a dead end. As I thought, he appeared disgusted. Still, knowing he could not completely ignore us, he spoke.

"Isn't Meme-san just Meme-san?"

"Despite being under the strange gaze of a strange girl who's of world-class significant, Mako-kun's , like a self-satisfied main character, believes and accepts her as a normal girl, and thought he was being clever."

"Meme-san just successfully delivered a third-person narrative, and thought she was being clever."

"Mako-kun bitterly riposted, but he's worried that it didn't carry much weight."

"Meme-san is about to realize that this whole narrative battle is pointless."

"Then I'll stop."

Mm, I shut my jaws. Mako-kun sighed while pressing his forehead, mumbling "I'm done."

After standing there and witnessing our usual banter, soft-cheeked cutie (tentative) froze. "Uwah~ Ya both got some fast comebacks." She's oddly impressed by something else. Next to her, Maekawa-san let out a snicker, "what~?' irking the cheek-girl. What a lovely environment, like have more daugh— no, sisters! (I asserted with wide eyes.)

"Surrounded by four cute girls, Mako-kun sure is lucky~"

"What's the notation you used to get that number?"

"Are you embarrassed?"

"You should consider being that sometimes."

"Ah, then—" Just as I was about to sigh silently to the hostile Mako-kun, Erio scurried over. Perhaps since she's spent too much away from people, she had forgotten about the right time and place for doing things. Or maybe she just doesn't want to directly confront him. As I contemplated, Erio walked down the entrance barefooted. “Ah, hold it!” She even ignored Mako-kun and circled behind me.

“Without me, mom...” Erio nudged my back, exchanging me into the row. “Now there are three… cute girls. The number, fits.” With three fingers up, she smiled softly.

“Eri-chan...” How considerate she is for her mom! As long as she grew up kind, it doesn't matter if she's not great or rich. I felt like I may or may not have expected that. Well, still a good kid. From the side, though, it probably looked really sarcastic.

“I'm the daughter-certified 'cute girl', nice to meet you all!”

I shook hands with my neighbors. Both Maekawa and soft-cheeked cutie both gave a compromising smile of 'ah… Well, okay,' and held my hand. On the other side, though still looking at me disapprovingly under his eyelids, Mako-kun stuck his hand out. So I had to pull his entire person over and nibble on his neck. Oh my~ it was out of nowhere!

“Eeek!” As if bumping into a serial killer, Mako-kun slipped under sheer terror. Kicking frantically like a puppy, he fell flat on the floor. Even the back of his head rammed into the wall.

Ah~ That was refreshing. Mako-kun's reaction are supposed to be a bit over the top!

“Maekawa, c'mere, c'mere.”

“Yes?”

Since the warm welcoming has ended, I beckoned Maekawa, who stared at Mako-kun amusingly. Just like before, when the lanky, yam-looking girl leaned over, the overwhelming pressure hovered above. “I need your ear closer.” Simply asking her to bend down was enough to give the illusion of a monster-bird flying above.

I put my mouth closer to Maekawa's ear. “I will punch you if you bite my ear.” Kgh, she can read minds?

“Maekawa, I heard you are making bottle rockets?”

“Uh, yeah. So you knew. Do you know that man?”

“Grown-ups have quite the lateral connections! Since vertical gaps are too deep, naturally we grow sideways instead. That's the cruel truth of society, sniffle!”

“But where I work, the gap and bar between the manager and employees is so low, everyone got over it.”

“Because your manager is the type to want to stand and see with the employees!”

“Not~ even~ close. Under what kind of work ethic are you allowed to say that?”

“Geez~ Maekawa-chan, don't be so angry~ You should be smiling instead since you're rarely in such a cute uniform cosplay.”

“I already said this isn't a cosplay, boss. Are you actually not just Touwa's mom, but also transfer student's?”

“Erio and Mako-kun are actually siblings, and I'm actually the slightly-older sister. The theory has been flying around, mostly in my head though.”

“Sheesh. Enough, cut to the chase already.”

“Do you still have some left over stuff to make rockets with?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“And bottles?”

“There's still some. I got them right before recycle day.”

“Then, let Erio and Mako-kun make some tonight. We're going to fire them tomorrow.”

“Eh? Tonight?”

“If it took too long, you can stay.”

“Oh...”

“Okay~, it's settled!” Shifting away from her ear, I slapped my hands together.

What's happened? Doubtful glances fell on me, but I simply smiled to have them relax. Then, my feet once again entered the shoes that were about to be taken off. I saluted, soldier-style.

“I'm heading out again!”

“Eh? Where to?” Relieved from pain, Mako-kun queried.

“It's. A. Secret.” I pouted my lips. Is this what you call brevity? Maybe not.

“Why do you have to say it so irritatingly?”

“As for dinner. Right, how about the four of you make something? You can use whatever is in the fridge.”

I don't really remember what's in there though. In any case, since the fridge is not like a CD case, there's should probably be edible in there. Erio only knows how to make ham sandwiches, but since there are two other girls present, the blossom of cooking will definitely dance on the dining table.

“C-cooking?” Cheek-chan replied bemusedly.

“It's a fantastic chance to snipe your favourite guys!” I casually gave her an encouraging thumbs-up.

“Eeek!” Cheek-chan shrunk exaggeratedly, eyes bouncing about. Fufufu, I saw everything. Her eyes landed on Mako-kun for just a second.

“What do you mean guys? I thought I'm the only one here.”

Mako-kun carelessly nitpicked. Is he generous? Or just dumb? He's usually the high school boy who's all 'I wanna flirt with girls~' Maybe it's because he's not used to the actual doing of things, so he doesn't know how it feels? Nii-san was like a total stalker to his crush! He even confessed to the same girl five times, and was rejected four times. Was his wife not disgusted?

“Yeah, just Mako-kun.”

“So what you mean is… Uh, eh?” His pitch rose; he stared at Cheek-chan's face.

Finally noticed? The two of them even had a look-exchanging party.

Erio stood fixed in the middle of the two, a face of 'what does this have to do with me~?' I thought she was close to Mako-kun. I guess it’s just admiration for her guardian?

Hmng, I seemed to have planted the seed of chaos. So I guess I will just leave.

And also to look forward to the sorts of colour their relationship will be in when I get home.

“I'm also heading back. I'll be back soon.” Maekawa put on her shoes.

“Alright, let's go~ Maekawa-chan.”

“Ah… Mom, bye bye.”

“Yep, I'm going.” I've never thought that hearing Erio's greet will ever be normal again.

I savoured the taste of this springy happiness and head out with Maekawa. Outside was a murky sky with a layer of cloud; a slit of dusk sun hid between the masses, its dots of light painting the silhouettes of people faraway. The sun was setting.

When I was little, my parents would get angry with me if I haven't return home by this time. The curfew is earlier in my house; even with my friends, I've never been there when they split up for the day.

Just once, I ignored the curfew and stayed at my friend's house. Mother actually came to pick me up; for some reason, I was mortified. Face down, I held my mom's hand on the sunset way home. She wasn't angry — rather, she looked lonely.

Mom is no longer with us. She has never seen her granddaughter.

“What are we doing with the rockets?” Maekawa spoke, eyes on the soft twilight sun.

To defeat them! I swallowed the words and looked skyward.

“We are shooting them, of course! With prayers.”

Even though it’s right there when you look up…

It is untouchable by hands.

Send it flying, to the concept of space.

☆

After night, the darkness in Tamura Shop gathers.

The eyelids exposed to the freezing air twitched weakly, inducing sleep. I yawned.

I entered the store, but still waited by the entrance. Omitting the highly unlikely welcome, I headed inside the residence on my own. I pulled open the slide door in the hallway and entered Obaa-chan's room:

“Evening, Obaa-chan. How are you feeling?”

A barren light illuminated the room; compared to the dim hall, it was unnaturally bight. But Obaa-chan covered her entire body with the futon anyway, so it made no difference.

“Hmph, if I felt well, I would happily be outside instead of lying in this room.”

Obaa-chan flung a greet-and-retort with the sulking tone of a child. The futon rose gradually; she revealed half her face. Perhaps doing better today, she personally picked up her glasses from the side:

“Why are you here so late? Don't try to play grown-ups, you damn brat.”

“Obaa-chan, I am actually an adult now.”

I sat on the left of the futon, rebutting Obaa-chan's censuring.

“Oh? Where?” That taunting tone does sound youthful.

“For example, the inside.”

“How about you have someone dissect you?”

“Then, my boobs!”

“I will smack you, brat!”

This deep sound of scolding seemed to follow with it the act of eyeball gauging. Hard to believe she could say something like that to the person she's always treated like her own child.

Eh? Is Obaa-chan still bothered by her own lack of growth?

Uuu, I have the premonition that there will be a rival in the gap-moe candidates.

“Simply speaking, you only grew on the outside.”

“Wow~ I can't believe you just said that out loud!”

“An adult with the brain of a child. That has to be the worst thing.”

Obaa-chan swallowed the pill made of joy and amusement, laughing only after a long pause; the way she opened her mouth gave me the unacceptable feeling of relief. The feeling of loss has been oozing deeper into my heart, creating a thin, tepid film. Gingerly feeling the weight teetering like a hammock, I knocked lightly, wondering 'how much longer?' There is no response.

“Heave… ho!” Obaa-chan tried to get up with a limped push up.

“Just lie down, it's fine. I will be leaving soon anyway.”

“Shut it, I want to sit.” Obaa-chan answered crudely; she folded her dragging legs and kneeled on them.

She exhaled slowly, as if to make sure her torso will not break, before sitting upright. The palms on her knees trembled; her elbows seemed they would snap at any second.

With a sour expression, Obaa-chan completely straightened her back. Perhaps to escape the pain coming from deep within, she focused only on me. With a hmph, she breathed in.

“Indeed, the only thing that has grown is just your body.” The statement was without any sentiment.

“I think you've shrunk, Obaa-chan.”

“Of course! If you can grow, adults can shrink.”

“Huh...”

“I've also shrunk 3 centimeters compare to sixty years ago. Where on earth did it go?” She resentfully looked to a surprising direction. She's angry like a person who found her saved-up snack stolen by someone else in the house.

“Don't tell me, aliens can steal people's height?”

Aliens. My brows and cheek reacted to this sensitive word.

For Obaa-chan, the ‘aliens’ are the source of misfortune.

It is also known as 'fate' — or 'concession' — to others.

“How's Erio doing? Is she helping out?” I held the rudder, steering the conversation away.

“Just how much did you spoil her? You are too pampering!”

Is she telling me to insult someone when there's a problem? Ugh, that doesn't matter. The point is that Obaa-chan didn't really answer in order.

“Even I'm wondering how big my actual heart it, letting someone who can't even welcome customers work in the front!”

“I wonder.”

“You sent her here, right? She will be in all kinds of hell now.”

“I suppose.”

“Teach her how to be as dumb as you are, so she could maybe deal with hardship.”

Obaa-chan followed a bug flying by the light. I too, looked up. Yet, it had disappeared.

I first waited for Obaa-chan's eyes to come back, then I began.

Gee, I always say the important things last. It's not a good habit:

“Obaa-chan.”

“What, old brat?” Don't make me kick yer ass!

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“I don't want to, it's a pain.”

“…...”

“...Don't give me that look… Ahh~ fine! I'm kidding; I'm free. Asking someone who's always sleeping if she's free, it just sounds like a taunt! So, what do you want?”

“Mm.” I sat upright. In that stance, I asked solemnly while fixing my messy hair:

“Do you want to go the beach tomorrow?”

“Wha? A sea bath? I can't do something so devious, no.”

Shaking her skin and bones, she refused to go outside as if there was no room for debate.

“How could I go to the beach now?”

“Why not?”

“You should know.”

“Your health?”

“Idiot! I'm not confident with my shape!”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, you brown!”

“Hmph, don't get carried away because you have thicker fat, purple.” (TL Notes: Not quite sure why they called each other colours)

Hmph! We pointlessly battled with our eyes. That reminds me: how's Erio's chest growing?

“I'm going to be taken away soon anyway. Nothing means anything.”

Obaa-chan easily spoke her mind. I knew she didn't misspeak.

Because she has always been like this.

That's why I've been thinking since twenty eight years ago.

It matters not if it was incomplete or whatever. Like struggling in water, I waved my arms:

“Just for tomorrow, I beg you!”

I pleaded, and pleaded, with all my prayers.

The thread I've sewed with actions was close to tear.

Would it hold till the end? That would be out of anyone's grasp.

I prayed to an existence unrelated to fate.

Finally, a nostalgic word of refreshment appeared.

“I remember that!”

“Eh?”

“Shouji has always said that whenever he's asking a girl out. 'Just for tomorrow, just for tomorrow!' After the date, he would then proceed to ask 'can we do this again?' He would even say 'today's date ended today; next time's will end next time.' What a buffoon!”

Obaa-chan looked out the house, toward the town, peering as if laughing at Nii-san's silly face.

At the same time, she smiled peacefully, as though enjoying the tranquil breeze of the sea.

“How did you know?” I asked, looking up in astonishment.

“You're the one who ran here and told me everything.”

“Ah, that's right. You sure have a good memory.”

“Of course! It's what you told me, after all.”

As Obaa-chan so declared, her sickly face seemed dyed with some colour:

“I'm at a lost, but I will go. I'll close the store for a day.”

“...Okay! Thank you, Obaa-chan, for going along with my whims.”

“You've always been whimsical. You will lose your voice if you tried to thank me every time. Just forget about saying those kind of stuff.”

“Alright, then time to head home~” I stood up energetically.

“Oh~ Go home, then. I'm really tired.” Shoo, Obaa-chan attempted to drive me off.

“I'll pick you up tomorrow. Be sure to get up and be ready!”

“Ah~ I know, I know. You be sure to get here!”

“Aye, aye.” She won't hit my head now even if I mess around. That's good, for now.

I turned back, discovering the door had been open all this time.

“Meme.” This was the first time Obaa-chan called my name today.

Looking back from the hall, I saw Obaa-chan's laboured figure sitting there:

“Be careful on your way home — you are a mother now.”

“Mm, I know. I will see you tomorrow.”

I bowed deeply before shutting the door:

“...Pheeeeew.”

As if imitating Obaa-chan, I let out all the air in my lungs.

I rested my forehead on the door, eyes closed. In sixteen bits colour, droplets of returning memories flushed the darkness.

The illusion of a little girl running through the hall with snacks in hands echoed behind.

Just you wait, aliens.

We may not see you, but the rockets will still get you.

☆

“So after being too excited in the bed for the entire night, I woke up late.”

Hearing my shameless report, Obaa-chan did not look disappointed. 'I've seen this coming,' she seemed to say.

“Really, now? I see you've an adult since long before: you haven't even change since three.”

“Yep, yep.”

“I will admit that you've grown enough to no look for excuses. Now, are we going to the beach? Take me there.”

As promised, Obaa-chan had on her outside clothes. She reached for me on the futon, and I took her hand over as if checking a ticket. I carried her up. Light, today as well. And she will still be light. I have, after all, became an adult… I'm forty. Argh!

“Hohoh~ You seemed tired!” Obaa-chan mocked at my undulating back.

“It's cuz I biked here as fast as I could. My knees are… a bit shaky.”

“You had no problem running around when you're young, and now you're playing old?”

Although it was unclear which part of that contained a compliment, Obaa-chan was somehow happy. People would always smile when they see someone they knew from long ago show up on the TV. In all the recent conversations I've had with Obaa-chan, I always felt so.

I went out the store front. For me, the true entrance to this house has always been the store. Obaa-chan, on the other hand, merely breathed lightly to my reflection.

As the forecast predicted, a stream of grey cloud covered the morning sky. Only if it would be sunny by the time we get there. I wished without expectation.

“It's not the same one.” Obaa-chan commented on the bicycle.

“That one broke long ago when I was still chasing Elliot around.”

“Oh.” And for some reason Obaa-chan looked away resentfully.

I let Obaa-chan sit on the back, had her hold onto my waist, and tied her hands together with a towel… Well, that was the plan, until — “No need, I will sit in the basket.” I was baffled for multiple reasons:

“Having you where the cargo is is kinda...” And the rocket's there too.

“Hush! I don't want to be tied up like a criminal.

“Just let me in.” She so stated, urging me from the back. A complex feeling like sputum in my throat bugged me; still, I seated Obaa-chan in the basket.

The transparently blue June 17th now sat in the back, strapped down by the towel brought for other reasons. 21st, the previously tested rocket, was better looking, but I chose this one today. Reason being that the lucky colour of the day was blue according to the morning fortune-reading program. So I thought, to affirm the unpredictable action that is a prayer, something just as unpredictable would suffice, right?

“How does it feel?”

“Worse than I imagined. I have no flesh on my hindquarter, so it hurts my tailbone.”

“So why don't you sit back here?”

“I refuse to.”

Obaa-chan shook her loose hair like a kid throwing a tantrum, turning down the offer to change seat. She never mentioned anything about the bottle rocket either, only maintaining the 'concise' attitude.

I first made sure both person and rocket were seated firmly, then straddled onto the bicycle as its driver. Kicking off the stand, I slowly gained balance while beginning to wind forward.

“Have you been there with Ojii-chan?”

“I swam in the river around here in the summer once. A brat fell in there, so I had to dive in the water. We didn't have cell phones, or people living around there, so we couldn't take the chances. I might have died too, had I been careless. Kids are such a handful!”

“Mm~ Obaa-chan is pretty hard to crack too!”

“What did you say? Seriously! Uwohh!” Every time when the basket bounced, Obaa-chan would look nauseous and complain about 'her butt hurting.' It seemed like to her, it would be too embarrassing if she didn't say anything. We began to enter streets where people frequent; perhaps that's how she chose to combat the awkwardness brought by this fact.

“Let me clarify beforehand.” Mixed in the wind, Obaa-chan's words flowed back.

“What is it?”

“I don't have a swim suit.”

Old people are clever, so out of self-defense, I remained silent.

Pedaling as hard as I could, I let the wind disperse all words.

As speed increased, that belief I had since childhood grew stronger.

If it were now, I might be able to fly. Again and again, I reminisced the wheels that spun, and climbed in the air.

☆

So was it the result of bringing today's lucky colour?

As we arrived at the beach after an hour of laborious biking, the sky drove the clouds away, letting pure sun shower the ground.

As if cut in half by a plethora of aircraft, the grey layers split. From the opening came the revered face of the sun that could never be directly viewed. My blood warmed to the skin touched by light.

“It's too hot. My nose is going to dry.”

Obaa-chan, who had been out of the sun for months, collected all the wrinkles around her nose, complaining at the sun. Her dried skin was as though raisin — as dry as it can be.

I parked the bicycle on a platform that rose like a hill. Then, I retrieved the rocket before helping Obaa-chan exit the basket. “What is that toy for? Are you going to play with it?” Obaa-chan didn't ask about the rocket till now; I simply twisted a grin. Picking her up again, I walked toward the platform to have her sit down. From here she should be able to see the ocean and the sky.

“Again with the uncomfortable seat.” Despite her grumbling, Obaa-chan still looked over the sea. From the wave-less sea came a breeze filled with the smell of tide.

Such rich wind even gave the illusion of sand entering the nostrils.

“Alright! Yamamoto-kun~!!” Next to Obaa-chan, I shouted toward the Yamamoto-kun who couldn't see me. “Oi~” From beneath returned the sound of sand shuffling, and a reply. Yamamoto-kun seemed used to the nickname, as well, not even responding.

With a dissatisfied scowl, Obaa-chan watched as things unfold.

“I'll leave this to you!” I tossed the plastic rocket toward the sky. On the bottle's way up, the sun penetrated it and shot a beam of azure into my eyes. The radiance was similar to the light shining down into the surface of the sea. For those drowning, it is both hope and death — a symbol to release them from the pain. I experienced the same light once, whenever I was too stubborn to lose to some friends when we went diving.

The rocket disappeared from my sight.

“Did you get it?”

“Somehow! Say something next time!”

Yamamoto-kun casually protested; his shuffling distanced away. Like with a cup of Ramen, we waited for a bit. I crossed my arms needlessly, standing showily against the sea.

“That voice. I’ve heard it before.” Obaa-chan mumbled apathetically.

“Really? Well, you might have met before.”

I answered; as though to enjoy the echo, I yelled at the top of my lungs: “Are you ready~?”

“Not ~yet~!” The soft-cheeked Cutie answered sluggishly.

“That one too. I think she was throwing a fit a while ago.”

“You sure know a lot of people, Obaa-chan.” And again: “Are you ready~?”

“Probably not~”

“Shouji’s son.” Perhaps for brevity’s sake, Obaa-chan revealed the answer.

“Are you ready~?”

“Not yet~” This time, Maekawa’s crisp voice.

“This one I don’t know.”

“There’s a new person, in case you are ever bored.”

Alright! Then… “Are you ready~?”

“R-ready~” Oh, that’s my daughter.

Deducing the answer to ‘what is this line-up?’ Obaa-chan squinted, elbows on her knees.

“What on earth is this about?” Face sitting on her palms, she commented with the tone of a bemused child.

A momentary pause appeared. I gazed at the waves washing away at the sand. I recall going to the beach with my family. Cold sweat beaded on my palm when I remembered the bouncy texture of the jelly fish. Then I remembered the day when Erio was brought back from the sea. Neither her person nor clothes were touched; she simply shivered in the winter sea donned in summer clothes — her lost memory of the past six months made me wonder if she traveled through time. Then at last, I see two Erio's — one sealed away in her futon, and another, standing on her own two feet — walking and standing together on the sand.

The memories appeared, like bubbling waves, and drifted away above the heart's surface.

Images of my first kiss with Elliot here — and I personally tore them apart with a smile.

Alright, alright~~ I stepped forward onto the edge and let my voice out.

Split, sea~~! With the same ambition, I yelled:

“Are you ready~~?”

The other side took a breath: a moment of delay. And then—

“““We are ready~!”””

“All right~ Let’s do it!!”

Answering my commanding arm, streams of water crashed into the sand.

Five plastic rockets broke free of gravity. The crux of recoil, water, continued to push; as if fishes in the sky, the rockets swam together into the air. An especially eye-catching, golden rocket lead vanguard into space.

With the altitude and volume less than that of a millionth of space, the fuel reached it limit. In terms of impact and everything else, it stood no chance.

Yet we still looked up to the genuine rockets that soared upward. Our eyes followed the trails, exhilarating us.

Dreams, hopes or prayers, those tiny frames carried all of that.

Obaa-chan wasn’t far behind, following the rockets with confusion. After confirming that with a side glance, I returned back onto the projectiles.

“Ah!” I sounded slightly disappointed. As each rocket reached its apex, they began to free fall.

Heads pointed at the horizon, the rockets took turn coming back. Pretending to be the tide, they did not refuse gravity on their way down, and disappeared from view.

“Urgh~ We’re not done yet!”

It is no time to be frustrated! You too, Obaa-chan, quit looking so lost!

Although it felt like forever, the second wave came in mere seconds. The second batch followed upward, again embellishing the sky. This, was the second squad of the rocket legion.

The mundane-looking black rocket fell behind his comrades, and swerved about. It might look like the most relaxed with its leisure flight; who made it? Must be someone clumsy!

“Obaa-chan, are you looking? Good!”

"Oi, what is…"

"Ah, here comes the next!"

Squad number three, the center. All rockets activated without hesitation, tracing out five different paths.

"Look! Look! That's my June 17th! It's flying!"

I shook Obaa-chan's shoulders, pointing at the translucent-blue rocket in the front. Obaa-chan gawked, replying only with a 'ahh.'

"How uninspired of you~" I laughed it off.

Perhaps because of its colour, my rocket carried out the longest distance, marking the record of the furthest in the air. Then it tipped at the peak and fell with its head first. I clamped down on my teeth, unwilling to let go of that sense of flight. Yet the rocket simply fell into retirement. Was that it? Any regrets? Fading away, it seemed to mock me so.

It overlapped with the feeling when Elliot had disappeared without a word. Something in me snapped.

"Elliot, you ass~!!" I yelled, hoping to reclaim my temper that way.

For the rockets, these might be the last.

They left, not because it is their job, but because it is their mission in life.

The most spectacular one flew the closest to the sea, but didn't look like a bottle at all.

With accessories included, it was shaped deliberately like a fish. The rocket shot directly toward the sun; with the body of a pale Skyfish, it drew a white line across the sky.

It may not have flew the farthest, but anyone would remember the vigorous flight of its incongruous silhouette.

Like a dying Skyfish in its final moments, it must have wished for someone to see it.

"Meme."

"Wait! There's still one more…"

"Hah?"

The pivot of the ritual. I was restless, as though seconds were hours:

"Here it is!"

To break through the field of view, that object rose from below, floated into the air, and flew into the sky.

A red plastic bottle with ridiculous speed zoomed by.

A bit further, a bit more, and more.

With prayers and envy, I wanted to see it off to wherever it goes.

But I already knew its fate.

Get there. Get there. Get there! Hit the aliens! Punch him in the guts!

You wanna see some real flesh? Look at your own!

The words of prayer exited naturally.

With me!

“Yamamoto!!”

Flash, explosion and flame hatched on the distant sky.

“Whoaaa!!” Hahah, Obaa-chan jumped!

The rocket burst. According to my plan, and according to Yamamoto-kun’s design.

The firework scattered sparks. Red particles danced, as to pollinate themselves onto the earth, connecting the resonance of scarlet onto the tympanic membrane.

A breath of the gas electrified by the explosion seemed to awe even the lungs.

Raucous cheers came below, one after another. I guess Yamamoto-kun didn’t tell the others? I assume he had told everyone to keep away for the sake of safety.

Obaa-chan kept her head up, completely fixed on the spot. Her eyes remained glued to where the bottle had exploded; her eyelids had given up on blinking.

On the other hand, I was thrilled. Accomplishment and stomach acid boiled deep within my body.

Elliot, I… I did it!

I tried so hard and did it.

So, did I defeat them?

I waited quietly. The answer to my doubt formed.

A wind scattered everything, gradually ending the firework.

The overwhelming sense of achievement went down, spreading into the nooks and crannies via the capillaries.

My toes rustled; my skin almost softened in the heat.

“You… What…” Obaa-chan looked like she was talking without moving her lips. Or maybe she’s mortified by the fact that she screamed. Either way, she didn’t know where to look.

“Ahahah! That’s not made by some amateurs! The firework master’s son, what’s his face… Yamamoto-kun made that plastic rocket. According to him, he used gun powder as the fuel, and the body was carbonized.”

“Oh… Is that so? Then, that voice must have been Ashiro’s.”

Ah, so that’s his name! Ashiro-kun. I remember the job part because I’ve eavedropped on him and Elliot. In other words, I remember that because of Elliot!

Obaa-chan’s emotion seemed numbed from the tinnitus; her eyes balls spun, but received nothing. I felt that describing astonishment as 'bubble-eating' seemed fairly appropriate.

“How was it?”

“Scared the light out of me.” For Obaa-chan, it was a very frank and honest comment.

“Have the aliens let their guard down with the fake rockets, then finally send the real deal up there.”

Boom! I imitated the explosion to relive my senses to the impact:

“This have to have annihilated them.”

By aliens, I mean those around Obaa-chan.

“Of course!” Obaa-chan answered with a poker face, grumbling: “This is too much for an old person.” Probably due to calming down, she exclaimed again: “Ah~ that surprised me.”

“It would have been pointless if you weren’t!”

“What, you want me to die from shock”

“Well, do you feel alive? How long has it been?”

Were the aliens in Obaa-chan — the nihilist — defeated?

Even for just a moment — even if it cannot be measured.

Obaa-chan shut her opened mouth, her lips pursed.

Her spying eyes shone. Perhaps out of fatigue, she closed her eyelids tightly.

And so she returned her cheeks onto her wrists, pretended to be ambivalent:

“Mm, it does feel great being able to let go of the stupid little things.”

“Hahah!”

To my laughter, Obaa-chan sourly mumbled, “this is no joke.”

“Well, I didn’t think the explosion was going to be so big.”

“… So, that’s it?” Obaa-chan questioned.

“Yep, that’s it.” It’s over. The only thing left to do is to enjoy lingering taste.

“You thought of all this?”

“I thought of all this!”

“All this time?”

“All~ this time. The aliens who wanted to perform cattle mutilation on Obaa-chan are gone now. They could have just stick with animals. Why did they have to cross the line? A hare will bite when cornered, you know.”

“Hmph, you even had a hand in the missing animals. Great work.”

“Thank you~” With head held high. Needless to say, Obaa-chan was being ironic.

“Absolutely idiotic.” Obaa-chan shrugged.

“But it was so much work! I’m even used to muscle sore now.”

I spun my right shoulder. “That’s just you getting more muscle.” I guess that works too.

“Ah, but that means… You knew I abduct the animals?”

“Of course! Normally speaking, who in her right mind would be so happy to report something like that? Besides…”

As if to be dramatic, Obaa-chan stopped.

“Besides?”

“There was an obvious claw mark on the back of your hand. Was it a cat?”

“Mm.” Must have been about two weeks ago when Obaa-chan was checking out my hand.

I involuntarily look down at my hand. The wound had healed.

“Animals have hated your guts since you were little.”

“You remember a lot, Obaa-chan.”

Quit acting so high and mighty! The anger seemed to gather near her lips, yet Obaa-chan only looked away:

“I told you: I remember everything you told me.”

“Heheh, thanks.”

I showed my elation. And so, Obaa-chan turned 180 degree around. In other words, toward me.

I smiled, deeply touched by the unfriendly yet honest attitude of hers.

“I defeated them.”

With twenty eight years of my life, I’ve defeated Obaa-chan’s aliens.

“With that?”

“Yep. Didn’t the rockets take out those aliens spectacularly?”

Did they? I ignored Obaa-chan’s muttering and kept talking:

“What I’m saying is, they will not take my grandmother away yet.”

I even went as far as to accentuate my victory.

“Hmph, my stupid granddaughter knows nothing of the aliens.”

Obaa-chan’s maiden last name was Tamura. She hmphed at me; pieces of youth returned to her visage. (TL Notes: In Japan, and I suspect other cultures as well, the term 'grandmother' – or other terms such as uncles, aunt, sister, etc — are not necessarily used for only people of these age with actual blood tie with the speaker. For example, 'Onii-san' is commonly used to address young man in a friendly manner. In this particular case, it wasn't clear until this point that Tamura Obaa-san is actually Meme's actual grandmother)

She threw away her grim facade, revealing her true face.

I patted my chest in relief.

Peering from the top, I stared at the beach. There's Mako-kun, surrounded by the girls; Erio, Maekawa-chan, and soft-cheeked Cutie. I held onto the Obaa-chan to let her see the view; we smiled at each other.

"For the son of that idiot Shouji, he's in a rather envious place."

"I know. The only reason Nii-san left town was for a girl!"

They basically eloped. Neither of their families were happy. And because of that, Nii-san rarely visited. Even with Mako-kun, I bet, he didn't want me to be the guardian.

"Now I remember, Mako-kun is actually Obaa-chan's great-grandson. So, how does it feel to finally meet him?"

"The first time he and Erio came, I thought it was you and Shouji."

Obaa-chan shut her lips, as though remember the sour taste of nostalgia:

"After that, I've resolved to see the whole 'life-flashing-before-eyes' thing."

"You really are a negative grandma~"

"I've been like this since your grandfather died. To keep it on the low, lest I crash and burn, I will have no strength for regrets."

She grumbled forsakenly, and used it to dispel her pent-up grief:

"Even since I became alone, I blamed the gods and the aliens for my living for so long. All that lives dies, but the 'when' differs. If there is someone who decides our fate, then he can be hated."

Like a machine gun, Obaa-chan spewed words that seemed to claw through the sound of waves.

On the other side, a shamble quartet came from the beach, singing 'happy birthday to you.' One of them is having a birthday?

"It's easier that way: people cannot express hate or grief to that which they can neither see nor touch. This is how we come to term with reality. Even if we must swallow insanity and stuff it deep in the bowel, at least we can live on, thinking 'it is what it is.' It is complacent; it is painful, but at least you can retain the will to stay alive. Even when your grandfather is gone, or when your daughter is gone, or if I'm the only one who will see my great-grandson, nothing will change."

Her tone was as if a hardened chunk of something in the rumen.

Even though it wouldn’t have been inappropriate with some mixed tears, Obaa-chan never cried.

Happy birthday Ryuushi~. My ears picked up the wacky lyrics. Ryuushi (粒子), like particles?

“But, you stupid granddaughter!” She glared. Just like a grandmother censuring her grandchild who had taken a prank too far.

“I’m sorry.” I lowered my head, apologizing to many people.

To Erio, for not being a perfect mother. To the animals, for forcing them to participate in a human’s business. To Yamamoto-kun, the friend who I used.

To Obaa-chan, for ignoring her will and projecting mine onto her.

…But, all I want is for her to stay for a while longer.

For my selfish wish, I wanted to defeat fate.

“There is nothing to apologize for.” Obaa-chan spoke again with a dried voice:

“Meme.”

“Yes?”

“Did you teach Erio ‘that’?”

“That? …Oh, you mean the futon? No, she figured that one out herself.”

“Mm… Wasn’t that what your grandfather did?”

She showed me a face of both sadness and joy:

“He too, hid in the futon when things go south. Like when he ate too much of the shop’s food, or when he was scolded for selling weird key chains to the kids, he would always hide in the futon.”

“Ahahah, it’s in the blood!” I clapped twice: “humans are truly mysterious!”

I felt the same thing when Obaa-chan wanted to ride in the bicycle’s basket.

Heritage, fate and the like connect us. Like a domino, one after another.

To resist it is as if to walk on water; however, I think it’s possible to change where the dominos fall. After what I did today, did I stop Obaa-chan’s dominos from falling toward the aliens?

"It is the same for me."

"What is?"

Obaa-chan beamed the most brilliant smile at me, looking up toward the blue sky where the rocket flew:

"When your grandfather died, my health also deteriorated. Right, remember I told you I was close to dying? Yet twenty eight years later, the gods never came to pick me up despite my failing health. The doctor I knew told me fifteen years ago that 'you don't have long.' Well, here I am."

She said so while lying down, arms and legs spread like wings:

"The gods might actually be very tactile!"

"Hah? Tactile?"

"Maybe they were waiting for me. To defeat the aliens." To defeat them.

"To defeat themselves?"

"Yep."

"… Hmph, this isn't some drama. They should have just killed me with a cross death-ray." Denying as she did, she sounded fulfilled. Lying there, Obaa-chan gazed straight at my face. A long sigh, as if the evaporation of her thoughts.

After that cleansing sigh, tranquility triumphantly occupied Obaa-chan's face.

"Stupid people truly are full of surprises." Obaa-chan uttered a few more fading words. From her relaxing lips and eyes though, it probably wasn't anything bad.

In any case, I replied to that first part:

"I am not an idiot: I just finished a game of sudoku on a magazine!"

Shut up, Obaa-chan whispered. "You'd be cuter if you were dumber." She then said so:

"When I'm dead, hand that store to Erio."

"…Really!" Again with those words. But I swallowed them back after Obaa-chan's next line.

"But I'm not dying yet!"

She hurried added.

"Eh~ You're so stingy~ Give some to your frequent customer me too~"

"Didn't you get that pastry store from your mom?"

"That store is no longer in my hands!"

"Judging by your work ethic, it's hard to say if it was ever."

"Hey, Obaa-chan."

"Mm."

"Can we go somewhere before heading back?"

I suggested the continuation of our day out, watching for her reaction. Obaa-chan immediately responded:

"Mm, sure. Either way…"

At that moment, she slightly straightened her torso.

With elbows holding her up, she flexed her abdomen. Even behind the clothes, the changes were visible. The tightening of the corner of her eyes, the clamping of her jaw: they were signs of her holding on.

Exerted impulse drove Obaa-chan. It pushed her atrophied muscles, damaged bones, and brain that constantly struggled with the legs that could no longer stand. The disjointed limbs caused her to roll over. But she had not given up on the goal. I held my hand back, digging nails deep into the palm and waited quietly for the moment to come. Ryuushi's birthday song paused; silence was upon us. Waves echoed faintly, as though guarding the space where something was about to happen.

And so, the effort was able to connect with the stubborn force of gravity.

That moment, I saw the particles appearing from Obaa-chan's hair.

"Either way, the store's closed for the day. What's better than spending a day with your granddaughter?"

Obaa-chan's hand stretched upward.

I cherishingly held it, gentling rubbing the back of her hand.

Let's go see Ojii-chan.

I've already decided the first thing to tell him.

That is, even when separated from so many people, I am still alive.

I, have turned forty.

八章　『E.T.の職場』

＜丹羽 真＞

●リュウシさんの誕生日を祝った。	+2
現在の青春ポイント合計	+2

＜藤和エリオ＞

●一緒に誕生日を祝った。	+3
現在の社会復帰ポイント合計	−36

＜藤和女々＞

●足が疲労でぴきゅいーんとしてる。	−4
●お祖母ちゃんがやたら悲観的。	−4
●求婚（KYUKON!）された。	−5
●ロケットがちゃんと打ち上がった。	+3
●お祖母ちゃんがちょっと元気になった。	+3
●幸せな四十歳になった。	+5
現在の幸福ポイント合計	+1

Chapter 8 — The E.T's Workplace

Why? For what reason? I questioned the ridiculous arrangement of a certain giant existence.

Did you just send me all your problems?

“Alright~ If you don't hurry up, the sun will make us old! Ugah~! I'm aging~! My skin is growing older every seven seconds~ It hurts! Sore! Muscles~!”

“Could you at least stop flailing around?”

While scolding the thirty-nine-plus-one years old person hugging my waist from behind, I tried speeding up according to her request: “Faster, faster, faster!”

My youth had burned and crashed; Meme-san's happiness point, however, looked like it was shooting toward the sky!

Why does it have to be her behind me all the time? Oba-chan's frequent visit is making me think that it's destiny — the unfortunate kind. My fate is being drained by something. I want to know what, not that it'd make a different.

Four days had passed since the beach-rocket event. It's the first of July — not having a schedule right after school could have been the cause of my downfall. Meme-san was waiting for me in front of the school.

“Hi~” She even waved once she saw me. If someone passing by asked me 'You into older ones?' I'm going to start, right then and there, my life as a hermit.

The black stray-dog roaming around the parking lot barked loudly at Meme-san from a distance. You sure are sharp. I complemented in my mind.

“...Why did you come here?”

I muttered quietly by the gate. I don't mind you popping out of nowhere, but at least know where to show up.

“Heheh.” She laughed mysterious for a bit, then raised her finger:

“Today is 'date with Oba-san' day!”

“Sounds like 'date with mom' day diluted 2000 times.”

I choked the bicycle grips and hoped to reach home earlier. Yet, she already circled behind the bike, moved the backpack and sat down on the rack.

“Alright, Oba-san is going to guide you hand-by-hand on how to be my hand.”

Hey, get you arms off me. Stop blowing into my ear. And don't change our position.

“Why is she the only one who's ever sat there...”

“With just three Happiness points, Meme-chan can pre-order the backseat.”

“I am seriously lost.” For me, it simply sounds like curse points.

Because of this, I was on a date with Oba-san after school.

The sun shone down, yet my heart was pitch black. Sure is amazing how it didn't pour. If it ever did, the umbrellas will be destroyed.

The destination: Tamura Shop. We were headed to peep on how Erio is doing:

“It's not fair that only Mako-kun can go in. I'm going to see Erio under the same condition too ~”

“Now that's bold, not trying to change your ways at all.”

Meme-san drags others down to make them see things the same way. But that's ok.

I noticed midway that the sun was shifting season: the light that weakened the moisture of rain heated the road and skin, creating a terrible dryness. The Sweat and lingering dampness — it was the season that people will fully realize how annoying perspiration really is.

My back, on which Meme-san squeezed tightly onto, naturally became the bed of heat and suffocation.

“…...”

So what happened?

No one told me the results of shooting those rockets at the beach. Meme-san, the space stalker/Maekawa-san fan, and even Tamura Obaa-san were there, but I still don't know what the rocket's explosion has cleared up.

Meme-san didn't look any different. She might take it for another meaning if I tell her; I cannot predict whether she will be pleased or not.

We arrived at the Tamura Shop. Backing up by kicking, I stopped in the front.

There wasn't a single rocket on our way here. Has it finished?

“Mako-kun is so cute; you're complaining, but still you hung out with me~”

“Am I to thank your happiness point for you being the only person to ever say that to me?”

Complaining as I did, when I turned her face was right there, and her embracing hands moved up. My heart sped up. Ok, I'm done. I'm a Obacon (snaps).

Letting Meme-san down first, I parked the bicycle. I left the backpack sitting in the basket after locking up and circled into the shop's entrance. Together, we stood by the bench and looked into the store.

“Mako-kun has been real friendly with Erio!” Meme-san, head peeking in, quietly asked.

“I don't think so.”

“When do you plan on becoming my honey?”

“When you're sourer.”

I pulled the properly-installed door open slightly to hear better.

In there, Touwa Erio held her fists tight, her voice trembling.

Amazingly, Tamura Obaa-san was in the store as well, perilously kneeling behind the register. From what I know, this was a first.

Meme-san stared at Obaa-san; she drew a sharp breath. She almost choked on her tongue.

Then she exhaled. Hah… Hah… Something buried under her heart followed her shaking breath.

I looked away from Meme-san's face and back into the store. I wonder: was she crying?

In a store with no customers played the voice lesson guided by Tamura Obaa-san.

“Wel...come...” The interior sucked Erio's tiny voice away.

“Unacceptable. One more time.” Tamura Obaa-san pointed out just where she was dissatisfied with and urged her to restart.

“Wel! ...come…” Erio burst and fell into pieces.

“That's not how people talk. Again.”

“Welcome...” As if poked with a needle, the end of her sentence deflated weakly.

“Ugh… Put more energy into it! Again!”

“Welcome…!”

Tamura Obaa-san finally pinpointed something abstract. She's still louder though.

Regardless, Erio was able to speak loudly in front of others now. On the path back to society, she took a firm step on the smooth road. Even though she needed a thousand steps just to stand back up; even though her speed is so slow it's hard to point out any progress, witnessing her growth was, because of so, so much more satisfying.

Erio's road back to society has just begun. Can this E.T successfully adapt to Earth?

“Listen well, Erio: if you can greet without any coma or period, I will give you double the salary.”

“Mm, I'll try. W...Welcome!”

“And before my throat dies.”

I sensed Tamura Obaa-san's shift in focus to solve the problem. So something did change on that beach? Perhaps that's why Meme-san was running around everywhere.

As I stared at Erio and Tamura Obaa-san, Oba-san silently hugged me from the side. Arms circling my left arm, she pressed onto me.

A-again… I almost froze. Upon sensing the air, however, I changed my attitude.

It was neither an embrace, nor an act of grovel — she merely leaned for support. Her face buried deep into my armpit, and her hair hung low with gravity; heels down from toes, she stood firm on the floor.

When Meme-san hid her face, her wrinkles, her everything. When she did all that, she looked just like a young girl.

“Happiness is the best!”

As though with teeth clamped, she uttered choppily.

The voice of a girl on her way back to a smooth, normal life echoed from the store, drowning those words. Following it was the sound of an old lady whose wrinkles were not wrinkling.

There seemed to be a cicada starting to cry on a tree far away.

Noises that were the breath of this town resonated, rippling continuously in my mind.

I thought I was restless; in fact, I felt goosebumps.

A feeling that was about to burst from the ground assaulted me.

As if to witness how the sensation was going to fly, I looked into the sky. From the crack on the ceiling, I saw the blue sky in which nothing flew by.

Cumulonimbus clouds stretched from faraway, waiting to devour the sun.

Since it was Meme-san to my side, my youth won't be lighted.

However.

Nonetheless.

“Yeah.” I muttered back.

How surprising.

I have come to accept this not-so-buggy fact.

The human will live on in this town of the aliens.

He will never find a UFO, and will keep looking at the sky.

Afterword

I did say last time that I was going to write a short story for the afterword… Sorry, just kidding!

Now with that excuse out of the way, let's nonchalantly begin this normal afterword. I didn't think there was going to a second volume… I think I wrote the same thing in the second volume of my other series too, but it's the same thing this time. I think I will still say the same thing if I ever have a new series.

Since I felt like there will be a few more books, I decided to list out this book's summary to fill up the lines. I've been camping out in my house as of recent, so I can't write any 'recently.' Well, here's the listing:

'Knives are allowed only in the kitchen. The police will show up if you take it outside' world view. New characters are never mentioned in the current volume 80 percent of the time. Hospitalization is not a per-book thing. Basically a Romantic Comedy: four hundred percent romance according to me. Probably zero in comparison though. Now when someone asks me 'What are you writing about?' the answer 'a bit of RomCom' will not be a lie. Hurray! I will needlessly connect the content with that of my other series. Sorry for those who have only read this one. Since they're mostly irrelevant, though, just ignore them if you don't understand. The main heroine of this series is not the aunt. This series is pretty much the opposite to うそつきみーくんとこわれたまーちゃん (Usotsuki Mii-kun to Kowareta Maa-chan. Lying Mii-kun and Broken Maa-chan)

Please allow me to give a word of thanks.

Though I write something so precariously similar every time, I still thank the two editors for their great help. I think you two must be quite tired of my slowly-revealed terrible personality by now, but please do continue with your assistance!

Also, to Mr. ブリキ(Buriki) who had also illustrated for the last volume: looks like I will be in your care in the future as well, so any advice is welcomed!

In addition, I naturally want to thank my father, who said 'stop saying bad things about me! Do that to your mom!' and is therefore retired from the afterword this time, and my mother who is more tactile in her speech.

I gave up this time due to circumstances, but if there was a third volume, I promise to write a really short story!

Thank you for purchasing this book.

Hitoma Iruma 人間入間

References

1. Jump up ↑ As in those cards with giant 39 written on them in the first volume
2. Jump up ↑ with か added, 叔母さん oba-san becomes お馬鹿さん obakasan - idiot
3. Jump up ↑ Kicking of the shadow is a reference to 蹴りたい背中, a book by 綿矢りさ. The meaning of the name is “A back/shadow asking to be kicked”
4. Jump up ↑ Area 51 in Nevada
5. Jump up ↑ Maekawa was in an eggplant 茄子 outfit
6. Jump up ↑ Meme is written as 女女, which meant women. Radio exercise is a sort of calisthenic performed in the morning as broadcasted by radio
7. Jump up ↑ a common rice-based, soft snack eaten all year round, but also on special occasions like New Years for celebratory purposes
8. Jump up ↑ another traditional Japanese snack, similar to the mochi, but smaller and often skewered
9. Jump up ↑ Originally something like smell-con, but I figured it's to understand this way
10. Jump up ↑ The ones you don't throw
11. Jump up ↑ Yukata is a tradition clothing. Geta is a type of wooden sandal. Zashiki Warashi is a yokai in folklore that are a sign of wealth
12. Jump up ↑ A reference to the opening of the classic anime Kitaro
13. Jump up ↑ Daifuku is like a mochi, and are usually filled with red bean paste. Dorayaki is like two pancakes with red bean paste in between
14. Jump up ↑ Shiroko しろこand Shirako しらこ are both written as 白子. Shiroko is a white dango, while shirako is a certain part of a fish… Look it up
15. Jump up ↑ hanami dango 花見団子 and bocchan dango 坊ちゃん団子are often skewered in trio of different colors
16. Jump up ↑ Dango glazed with a syrup made from soy sauce, sugar and starch
17. Jump up ↑ From Ace Attorney, the character Yahari Masashi 矢張政志, whose name resulted with the saying やっぱり矢張 You know it's Yahari. His name is localized as Larry Butz
18. Jump up ↑ Environmental Protection Agency

19. Jump up ↑ Another reference to Gegege no Kitaro
20. Jump up ↑ a type of dried fish shaving often put on takoyaki and okonomiyaki. They pop and move when in contact with high heat
21. Jump up ↑ 三すくき translates to three-way standoff, which is often pictured with a snake to frog, frog to slug, and slug to snake situation
22. Jump up ↑ Ecchan is from Sarutobi Ecchan by Ishinomori Shotaro, Rio-chan is the mascot of popular pachinko machine Rio Paradiseリオパラダイス, and Orie refers to Kimoto Orie 樹元オリオ, a voice actress
23. Jump up ↑ Deli-cali, Ryuushi's made-up word that combines delicacy デリカシー and non-calorie ノンカロリー it was of course modified to sound more understandable
24. Jump up ↑ Similar to mochi, but made of bracken starch instead of rice. Popular in Kansai region
25. Jump up ↑ This is a play on popular children's cartoon Doraemon, in which episodes often begin with the main character, Nobita running to Doraemon, a futuristic robot cat, for help after being bullied
26. Jump up ↑ The monster Twin Tail from the Ultraman series. The name is spelt as ツインテール like the hair
27. Jump up ↑ a phrase commonly used for Japanese men when proposing marriage. “Cook miso soup for me every morning.”
28. Jump up ↑ reference to the animation studio Toeic. Nagashi-soumen are noodles that flow from a little canal that people can pick up and eat during special occasions
29. Jump up ↑ おばさん aunt and おばあさん grandmother is only slightly different
30. Jump up ↑ Mario
31. Jump up ↑ reference to Pino from Wonder Project J, a raising simulation on Famicom
32. Jump up ↑ the sacks are referring to monster dissection charts in children magazines back in the days. These organs are used to explain how monsters could spit fire, ice or radioactive beam. Godzilla was apparently a popular one
33. Jump up ↑ Meme-san pronounced キューティcutie as キューチー cyu-chi. ジューシー Juicy sounds similar
34. Jump up ↑ referring to Ikkyuu-san, an old anime regarding a youthful ikkyuu Soujyun, an iconoclastic Buddhist monk
35. Jump up ↑ The character 性 has the meaning of nature, and by extension personality. 根 has the meaning root, and by extension origin
36. Jump up ↑ Nozuchi is a Youkai that looks like a snake with no eyes

or nose

37. Jump up ↑ Referring to Jaguar Yokota, a Japanese female wrestler
38. Jump up ↑ Japanese certification system with 12 levels, the lower the number the higher difficulty. Not sure with English, but could be similar. Makoto has level 3 for Kanji, which is middle school level, meaning Ryuushi...
39. Jump up ↑ 大 人買い originally meant adult buying a large amount of kid's toys, it later on extends to buying whole volumes of manga, videos, hobby items etc
40. Jump up ↑ I thought at first it might have been Makoto's mother, but she is not. If you search the name up, I believe you can find this name in other works by Iruma Hitoma
41. Jump up ↑ Referring to X-Files
42. Jump up ↑ From the text it seemed that she used the suffix でござる, which is an old way of saying です. As for why Ryuushi said it, it's probably just because she talks funny
43. Jump up ↑ I translated Mochi-mochi sensei as smooth-skinned. It happened to be the same sound as mochi, the food.
44. Jump up ↑ The first aircraft that carried human onto the surface of the moon. Think Neil Armstrong
45. Jump up ↑ 亀の甲より年の功 Literally age is better than shell, meaning that experience of age is the best teacher
46. Jump up ↑ 中 雨, pronounced naka-same as the author indicated, is not an actual vocabulary in Japanese. But the characters do mean medium rain
47. Jump up ↑ I would love to know if someone else could translate the word denpa, in this context, into an equivalent English term
48. Jump up ↑ Referring to Ricky Martin, who's had a Disney album
49. Jump up ↑ Slam dunk reference. It's the first thing Akagi Haruko said to Sakuragi Hanamichi
50. Jump up ↑ Ryuushi's typical word pun
51. Jump up ↑ Blue berries supposedly improve eye sight
52. Jump up ↑ 親子丼A donburi with chicken, egg and sliced scallion
53. Jump up ↑ Gohei語弊refers to issues when wording or similar words could cause misunderstanding. Gohei-mochi is a type of food
54. Jump up ↑ Japanese steamed cake made of rice flour and sugar. Kind of like mochi without the powder
55. Jump up ↑ I haven't. If someone figures this out, feel free to add on
56. Jump up ↑ Reference to children's song ふしぎなポケット, the

mysterious pocket. In the song, biscuits seem to multiply infinitely if you pat your pocket

57. Jump up ↑ Swimmy, by Leo Lionni, is a story about a black fish born amongst red fishes. The Red Fruit Has Burst 赤い実弾けたis by author Nagida Keiko. It apparently also has a manga collection under the same name. Supposedly, it is about the momentary feeling of the realization of something
58. Jump up ↑ Reference to Mr. Saturn of Earthbound
59. Jump up ↑ Reference to Sazae-san, whose maiden last name is Isono
60. Jump up ↑ Boing is the sound Mr. Saturn makes
61. Jump up ↑ A typical Japanese costume drama scene is one which a corrupt governor – a tono-sama 殿様 — would pull on the kimono sash of a girl, spinning her like a top while undressing her in the process. I took the liberty of calling it the sash-pulling game
62. Jump up ↑ In comedy, the person having the sash-puled would often spin while screaming あれえ～
63. Jump up ↑ Polyethylene, or common plastic
64. Jump up ↑ Names of UFO that appear in the sky in the form of a rod
65. Jump up ↑ Reference to PS2 game Siren, specifically the character Maeda Mayumi